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Effective Practices for English Language Learners

David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman

Effective teachers of English language learners follow sound principles as they develop curriculum. In this article we would like to share a checklist we have developed which reflects principles for ESL teaching based on current research in first and second language acquisition and on best teaching practices (Freeman and Freeman, 1998). Our hope is that readers will use this checklist as they plan curriculum. We then expand on the first item of the Checklist to provide a more extended example of effective teaching for English language learners.

Checklist for Effective Practice

The Checklist for Effective Practice consists of a series of questions. If teachers can answer "yes" to the questions, they are probably taking into consideration key factors that will improve the chance of school success for all their students and particularly for their second language students. Below we list the eight questions from the checklist and briefly comment on each.

1. Is curriculum organized around "big" questions?

Collier (1995) points out that school success depends on students developing cognitive, academic, and language proficiency. These three areas are interrelated. Cognitive development results from solving problems in or out of school. Academic development involves problem solving in school related areas. Students need enough language proficiency and the appropriate skills to engage in these problem-solving activities and achieve academically.

When teachers organize curriculum around significant questions, they involve students in solving meaningful problems. For example, students might investigate questions such as "How are we alike and how are we different?" or "How does where we live influence how we live?" As students explore these relevant questions, they develop higher levels of cognitive, academic, and language proficiency.

2. Are students involved in authentic reading and writing experiences?

As students explore important questions, they naturally turn to both fiction and nonfiction texts as sources for information. For example, a book like *Who Belongs Here?* (Knight, 1993) provides students with both a fictional story of an immigrant boy who feels rejected by classmates at school and fascinating historical facts concerning many immigrants groups who have come to the United States. Bilingual

learners would relate to both the story and the social studies information and could use both sources of information in exploring the "big" question in the book's title.

For English language learners, predictable whole stories, novels, plays, and poems as well as complete pieces of nonfiction are more comprehensible than simplified texts or excerpts because the context is richer. Once students have researched their question, they write to present their understandings to classmates or to a wider audience. Engagement with authentic literacy activities of these kinds promotes literacy as well as cognitive, academic, and language development.

3. Is there an attempt to draw on student background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?

Smith (1983) has explained that we do not learn if we are confused or bored. When school topics do not relate to students' lives, they may find themselves either confused or bored. Since much of the standard school curriculum is geared to the life experiences of mainstream students, English language learners may find making connections between what they are studying and what they already know difficult. Further, when students can't understand the language of instruction, they may become frustrated.

On the other hand, when students receive comprehensible input (Krashen 1982) and when they can link school subjects with their life experiences, they learn. The best way to make input comprehensible is through use of a lesson preview and review in the first language. Further, teachers who provide students with choices in the questions they investigate, create greater possibilities of students' connecting their experiences outside school with their studies in school. This approach allows all students to build on the knowledge and concepts they bring to school.

4. Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?

Too often instruction for English learners is organized around a set of decontextualized skills. The goal of these exercises is to have students learn rules and practice language until it is automatic. However, these activities do not involve learners in real problem solving nor are they pleasurable. Skill building does not foster literacy or promote cognitive, academic, or language development. Such instruction is not meaningful to second language students, nor does it serve their immediate purposes.

In contrast, when students engage with significant questions that they have helped to pose, they realize that knowledge from different curricular areas - language arts, social studies, science, math, and the arts is essential for solving their problems. At that point, academic content is meaningful because it serves a purpose for students.

5. Do students have opportunities to work collaboratively?

Holt (1993) has shown clearly the benefits of collaboration for language minority students. These benefits are both cognitive and affective. Smith (1983) points out that language acquisition is a social activity. Students develop language in authentic social contexts as they help each other make sense of content and concepts. In the process of collaborating while reading and discussing authentic literature, writing responses and authoring their own books, and investigating interesting questions and reporting their findings, students develop the academic language they need to expand their knowledge of academic content areas.

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6. Do students read and write as well as speak and listen during their learning experiences?

Second language learners acquire language through all four modes. They should be encouraged to read and write as well as speak and listen from the beginning of their experiences with English. Research has shown that many second language learners may read or write before they speak and that comprehension is often enriched by literacy experiences (Freeman and Freeman 1998; Hudelson 1984). Development of literacy is crucial for academic success, and teachers shouldn't delay reading and writing for second language students.

7. Are students' primary languages and cultures valued, supported, and developed?

Students who fully develop their primary language acquire a second language more quickly. In addition, both academic concepts and knowledge of literacy are most easily learned in the primary language. Cummins (1981) has shown that a common proficiency underlies languages. Because of this common underlying proficiency, knowledge developed in the primary language transfers to a second language. Further, bilingualism enriches the individual and the community. Even when teachers are not able to provide instruction in all their students' primary languages, they can find ways to support those languages and can also involve students in activities to explore the cultures of all the students in the classroom (Freeman and Freeman 1994).

8. Are students involved in activities that build their self-esteem and provide them with opportunities to succeed?

When teachers have faith in their students and the students themselves believe they can learn, these high expectations lead to academic success (Collier 1995; Goodman 1991).

The questions we present here in the checklist are intended as a guide for assessing classroom practice. We believe that when teachers can answer "yes" to most of these questions as they reflect on lessons or units, they are providing effective instruction for all their students, including their English language learners. In the following section we provide a specific example of teaching that follows the first item on the Checklist: "Is curriculum organized around "big" questions?"

America Theme

A number of writers have argued that students of all ages need to be engaged in the investigation of important issues. Clark (1988) for example, points out that curriculum should involve students "in some of the significant issues of life" and therefore encourages teachers to center their curriculum on "questions worth arguing about" (p. 29). He suggests questions for different grade levels such as "How am I a member of many families?" (K1); "What are the patterns that make communities work?" (2-3); "How do humans and culture evolve and change?" (4-5); and "How does one live responsibly as a member of the global village?" (6-8).

Sizer (1990) draws on this same idea by suggesting that organizing around "Essential Questions" leads to "engaging and effective curricula." In U.S. history, for example, teachers might begin with broad questions such as "Who is American?" "Who should stay?" "Who should stay out?" "Whose country is it anyway?" Teachers at all grade levels could involve students in answering these questions. Often, reading a piece of quality literature is a good way to begin.

To launch a discussion of "Who is American?" a teacher might begin by reading to the class *America, My Land, Your Land, Our Land* (Nikola-Lisa, 1997). This innovative book consists of a series of illustrations that evoke the inherent contrasts in America. These include "farm land, wood land," "young land, old land" "fast land, slow land," and "rich land, poor land" among others. Each two-page spread is illustrated by a different artist, and the artists use different techniques and media to create their particular contrasting pair. The artists are notable in that all of them are from linguistic or ethnic minority groups within the United States. *America* is an excellent book to use in an ESL class for students of any grade level. The text is limited, and the illustrations bring out contrasts worth talking about. In fact, on the cover of the book under the large title, "America" is a picture of the United States, and several teachers we have worked with have raised an important big question "Why do people from the United States call themselves Americans?" "What about people from Canada, Mexico, and Central or South America?"

Another book teachers could use to develop the question, "Who is American?" is *Who Belongs Here? An American Story* (Knight, 1993). *Who Belongs Here?* is the story of a Cambodian refugee, Nary, who comes from a refugee camp in Thailand to live with relatives in the United States. Nary thinks the U.S. is a wonderful place until he goes to school. There classmates harass him, telling him to "get on the boat and go back home." Fortunately, Nary's teacher is sensitive to his problems. With Nary, she plans a lesson to help all the students begin to understand how hard it is to be a refugee in a country where you don't speak the language. During social studies, some students pretend to be refugees. They have to convince non-English-speaking guards that they are seeking asylum and that they need food. This lesson helps sensitize other students to the plight of refugees like Nary.

Knight's book poses some big questions. She asks, "What if everyone who now lives in the U.S. but whose ancestors came from another country was forced to return to his or her homeland? What if everyone who lives in the U.S. was told to leave? Who would be left?"

Who Belongs Here? is a unique book, as well, because it contains both fiction and non-fiction. The top section of each page carries the story of Nary coming to the United States and adjusting to America. The bottom section, printed in italics, contains relevant historical information. For example, on one page, at the top, the story tells how Nary admires Dith Pran, who has traveled throughout the United States to tell people about the terrible events that took place in the killing fields of Cambodia. The bottom of that same page tells how Dolores Huerta has traveled around the U.S. giving talks about the plight of farm laborers. The combination of fiction and non-fiction in this book makes it ideal for a language arts-social studies block class. This juxtaposition of actual historical events and people with the fictional narrative emphasizes the relevance of Knight's big question, "Who belongs here?"

The big question, "Who belongs here?" is also raised in Luis Rodríguez' (1997) poignant story *América is her Name*. This somewhat longer piece of children's literature would be appropriate for older students who are more proficient readers. It is also available in Spanish, *La llaman América*. The Spanish version could be used as a preview and review for the English text.

Rodríguez writes of a young Mixteca girl named América living in a violent Chicago barrio. Her father has been laid off from his factory work and her uncle, who lives with them, is always drinking. América dreams of her life in rural Oaxaca as she sits silently in the back of her ESL class. She has overheard her teacher saying to another teacher that América is illegal. She thinks to herself, "How can a girl called América not belong in America?"

Then one day, Mr. Aponte, a Puerto Rican poet visits her class. He asks in Spanish if anyone can recite a poem, and América volunteers. This girl, who is silent in an English-only setting speaks out clearly when encouraged to use her first language, and her classmates applaud. Mr. Aponte then has the children begin to write poems in both Spanish and English. Despite initial resistance from her family, and particularly from her father, who doesn't see how poetry will help to pay their bills, América continues to write and her efforts help unite her family.

Many English language learners can identify with the girl in this story. She faces many of the problems other immigrants face as they leave one world for another. In *América is her Name* Rodríguez shows how one child uses her writing to cope with the many difficulties she and her family face.

A fourth book that raises big questions around the America theme is *Grandfather's Journey* (Say, 1993). The narrator is a young boy who tells how his grandfather left his native Japan to come to America. The grandfather travels all over this vast country before settling in San Francisco. He returns to Japan to marry his childhood sweetheart and then brings her back to live in San Francisco. They have a daughter. When she is nearly grown, the grandfather starts thinking about his old friends and the rivers and mountains of Japan. He takes his family back to Japan. His daughter marries and has a son of her own, the narrator. The family plans to return to California, but the war breaks out and the grandfather never can return. When the narrator grows up, he is able to travel the U.S. as his grandfather did. He also falls in love with California and lives there, marries, and has a daughter of his own. But he misses his old friends and the mountains and rivers of Japan. As he thinks about his life, he comments, "The funny thing is, the moment I am in one country, I am homesick for the other."

Grandfather's Journey, which is also available in Spanish (Say, 1997) raises a number of important questions. The central question, and one that many second language students would find relevant is "Can bilingual, bicultural people ever be completely happy as they try to live between worlds?" While there are clear benefits of being bilingual and bicultural, there are also difficulties, and it is important for students to talk, read, and write about questions such as this one.

Organizing curriculum around big questions allows teachers to engage students in significant content study no matter what the students' language proficiency or academic background might be. With a broad questions such as "Who is American?" a teacher can use a range of reading materials and can allow students to respond in various ways. Students with more limited English proficiency could illustrate and label a contrast similar to those in the *America* book. Several students could combine their work to create their own book. Further, they could use the pages as a basis for oral presentations to classmates.

More proficient students might research their own family history to find out whether any of their family members, like the characters in *Grandfather's Journey*, have traveled between cultures. They could conduct interviews and write up the results as biography, or they

could use details from their family histories to create a fictional account, as Alan Say, author of *Grandfather's Journey*, did.

Some students might enjoy listening to the works of famous poets, learning to recite poetry, and then writing their own poems as the main character does in *América is her Name*. Often students with more limited English proficiency find it easier to move into English writing with short poems rather than stories or reports. They can illustrate their poems and read them to classmates and family members.

Other students might want to combine the story of a refugee coming to America with historical data on early immigrants and on the activities of immigrant groups in the United States to create a book, following the pattern that Knight develops in *Who Belongs Here?* This would provide students with a good opportunity to combine language arts with social studies.

Conclusion

Effective teachers engage students in investigating big questions, questions that matter to the students and to the society they are a part of. As students attempt to find answers to big questions, they can develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing proficiencies in both English and in their primary language. In this process they will develop cognitive, linguistic, and academic skills and abilities in the language or languages that they use.

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