HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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In this chapter, we consider, on the basis of a select review of the literature, which issues matter most with respect to the academic achievement of English language learners. To do this, we begin by examining the notion of best practices for the instruction of English language learners (ELLs) with a particular focus on language and literacy, and we consider what our field gains and loses by foregrounding an approach to instruction that may obscure other more pressing concerns. For example, Valenzuela (1999) points out that far too often good or effective teaching is viewed solely in methodological terms and that such a perspective backgrounds what may be more influential, which is the development of meaningful relationships between young people and teachers. Valenzuela develops her thesis that teachers and other educators need to develop and communicate an ethic of caring before students are willing to invest in the process of schooling, or as she puts it, “many students ask to be cared for before they care about” (p. 24).

The fact that instructional methods have been foregrounded in the minds of many educators and policymakers may be an artifact of traditional academic perspectives and approaches to thinking about the schooling of ELLs. Traditional ways of thinking about ELLs and academic achievement tend to privilege discussion of factors that can be readily identified, measured, or counted. For example, Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2006) offer a synthesis on this topic, and while they recognize that many factors influence these students’ school experiences, they limit their discussion to only consider a particular set of issues that affect oral language, literacy, or other academic outcomes.

In contrast, Hawkins (2004) challenges the dominant discourses of current federal policy, suggesting that there is a good deal of disagreement within the educational research community about how to identify “best practices.” Hawkins calls for a collaborative research agenda that acknowledges the sociocultural nature of language teaching and learning that focuses on communities of practice rather than the transmission of skills and knowledge. While we would argue that extensive knowledge of effective instructional practices and methodologies is absolutely necessary for teachers to be successful in providing equitable access to academic content for ELLs, this knowledge is in no way sufficient. Otherwise, teachers and students are overlooked as both the primary participants and determinants of what happens in classrooms. They engage or fail to engage in the tasks of teaching and learning to the degree that they view these activities as worthwhile investments of their time and energy (e.g., Pierce, 1995; Pittaway, 2004). Citing Bourdieu, Pierce (1995) suggests that individual learners exercise agency to the degree that they assert the right to be heard, and successful instruction consists in teachers structuring opportunities for learners to develop competency inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition, Reinking (2007) has argued that the notion of best practices needs critical examination. He contends that literacy researchers would be better served by the pursuit of good and better practices while simultaneously identifying and exposing malpractice. We agree with his analysis while at the same time we recognize and understand our responsibility to provide teachers with useful instructional tools. Here we examine literature that identifies critical issues shown to play a role in the academic achievement of ELLs. These issues begin with the recognition that far too many ELLs languish in classrooms where no cognitive challenge is present, where instruction consists of meaningless routines disconnected from the mainstream curriculum, and where students, for the most part, are tracked into academic dead ends far from the goals of either meaningful work or tertiary schooling (Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Reeves, 2006).

Narrative and ethnographic methods provide rich descriptions and in-depth explanations of what motivates ELLs to engage or disengage in communication, and these methodologies capture aspects of dynamic, shifting processes and subtleties of interaction that experimental studies...
alone cannot (Bell, 2002). McKay and Wong (1996) provide an outstanding example of an ethnographic study of four ELLs and four of their teachers in an English as a second language (ESL) program in a California middle school. Their careful observations allowed them to document the ways that learners were positioned by discourses of power and how they exerted agency in accepting or resisting these dominant discourses. For instance, one learner identified himself as an athlete and rejected the nerdy role suggested by the “model minority stereotype” to which he was subjected. Consequently, he focused his language learning efforts on listening and speaking skills and resisted efforts to focus on reading and writing.

While acknowledging that descriptive methodologies may not answer questions of causality, we foreground qualitative and ethnographic work in this chapter for the purpose of determining how teachers can build meaningful relationships through interactions with their students. “School success is created in educator-student interactions that simultaneously affirm student identities and provide a balance of explicit instruction focused on academic language, content, and strategies together with extensive opportunities for students to engage with literacy and collaborative critical inquiry” (Cummins, 2000, p. 268). We argue that ELLs are particularly vulnerable in schools because they lack sufficient proficiency in English, which limits access to and the ability to form relationships with their teachers. We begin this chapter with a brief critique of two of the main theoretical perspectives that guide the research done in the field of ELL instruction. We then identify problematic practices, and close the chapter by contextualizing useful instructional practices identified within this body of literature that lead to the academic achievement of ELLs. We assert that this focus on relationships should inform academic discourses regarding the quality of instructional practices for frequently marginalized students by emphasizing the fundamental nature of human interaction in the learning process.

Theoretical Perspectives

Cognitive theories, while not monolithic or inherently opposed to socially oriented perspectives such as sociocultural theory, are occasionally employed in ways that we find problematic. For instance, some cognitive theorists portray learning in a mechanistic manner that deemphasizes the role of a thinking, feeling human being actively engaged in the learning process (e.g., Rumelhart, 1980). Our concern is that such a perspective may further marginalize language learners who are already physically segregated and emotionally disenfranchised. Also, some cognitive theories portray thinking and learning processes as universal (e.g., Von Eckardt, 1995); that is, linguistic and cultural differences do not affect the “underlying” cognitive processes that are more fundamental to all human thought. Thus, the unique linguistic strengths and cultural resources that ELLs bring to the classroom are seen as irrelevant, or at least secondary, to the learning process. Related to this critique is the notion of “normal” development and thinking common to cognitive theories. However, conceptions of what is considered the norm exist in tension with understandings of diversity and difference, and as these tensions play out in the classroom, they tend to contribute to the “othering” and alienation frequently experienced by language learners (Jiménez, Handsfeld, & Fisher 2008).

To be fair to these authors, and to cognitive theory more broadly, there appears to be a tension between goal-oriented activity and the more mechanistic descriptions of reading that we critique. Moreover, we understand that a number of sociocognitive researchers recognize the central role of culture and social interaction in their research (e.g., Moll, Estrada, Díaz, & Lopes, 1980). Thus, it is not all cognitive theories and theorists that we critique; rather, we claim that an emphasis on automatic processes and universalist assumptions tend to reinforce inequities for ELLs in classrooms where everyone is simply “treated the same” and where the unique strengths that these students bring as a result of their cultural and linguistic heritages remain unacknowledged.

In contrast, sociocultural theory conceives of the mind and learning as firmly rooted in human interaction and activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Vercoulou, 1985; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) where learning is considered more than just in terms of the individual. It is necessary to understand emotional and social factors, as well as cognitive factors, when considering student achievement in schools. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) theorized that “humans are always and everywhere social entities” (p. 56), and that the development of higher order thinking requires social interaction. With this perspective, all meaning and understanding is both mediated and constructed by and through culture. Thinking is mediated by both the activities in which one participates (i.e., going to school), the artifacts used (i.e., textbooks), and the concepts considered therein (i.e., education). In this chapter, the role of language is considered as a key mediator. Teachers mediate learning for all of their students through building relationships through language, including ELLs. Much research argues that the relationships teachers build with ELLs serve to mediate ELLs’ learning in schools (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Lee, 2005; Valdés, 2001; Farr, 2006). The centrality of teacher-student relationships is epitomized by those who advocate an ethic of caring, which involves authentic dialogue and the confirmation of individual students (Noddings, 2005).

Cummins (2000) adds that “human relationships are at the heart of schooling” (p. 40), and also that some groups of students, because of historic inequities present in certain contemporary societies such as the United States, require “identity negotiation” if patterns of failure are to be reversed (p. 263). Without a doubt, many students classified as ELL constitute at least one of these groups. Finally, we believe it is important to point out that building healthy relationships requires time, effort, and information. It is not enough to accept the notion that relationships matter, one must also...
recognize that histories of domination and marginalization involve institutions, societal structures, and various ethnic and cultural communities. These additional facets of relationships indicate a need to look beyond individual personalities and desires.

Recently, national reading assessments revealed that 70% of ELLs in fourth grade scored below basic levels of achievement (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). In light of alarming results such as these, there is clear need to discover the essential and effective components of successful instruction for ELLs. We argue that the sociocultural framework offers a well-suited approach to investigating the issues that come into play in the academic success of ELLs. The work on teacher-student relationships will be further explored here as an example of the rich, informative, and valuable contributions it makes to the research field.

Finding Ways to Build Meaningful Relationships

Both Flores-González (2002) and Valenzuela (1999) emphasize the importance of building meaningful relationships with students. Flores-González argues that what happens in schools is more important than home and community life, and that for the urban high school students of Puerto Rican origin in her study, the nature of this relationship determined whether students completed high school or whether they dropped out. This researcher identified four contexts in which students can connect with meaningful adults: athletics, academics, social clubs, and support services (p. 76).

She points out that in contrast to the productive possibilities available in schools, gang activity also exerts a powerful influence on many youths because gangs offer an “extracurricular activity” in which many high school students can excel. She adds that many of these urban students experience personal problems due to poverty, negative relationships with parents, and family responsibilities. A recurring issue for many adolescents is their belief that no one, particularly their parents, loves them. Flores-González argues that informed and understanding school personnel willing to get involved in students’ lives can ameliorate the problems faced by these students. Her argument is that if school personnel can find ways to address students’ pain and other life concerns that they will then, in turn, be more willing to invest their time and effort in learning.

Taking a somewhat different tack, Valenzuela (1999) critically examines the common wisdom that Latino youths are inherently anti-school and that they reflexively assume an oppositional stance toward education. She rejects this notion and argues instead that these young people often end up rejecting a system that consistently and knowingly disrespects them. Her underlying thesis is that the typical schooling experience subtracts the cultural, linguistic and community-based knowledge and resources possessed by culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. This subtractive schooling has the effect of producing students that are suspicious of the school’s agenda and who also often find themselves in conflict with teachers, even those with good intentions. Valenzuela concludes that teachers who sincerely want better relations with their Mexican American students must learn all that they can about this community and its history of subordination in the United States. In other words, she does not recommend that teachers need further professional development concerning instructional methods but rather that they learn how to build meaningful relationships with students. Even so, we recognize that good instructional methods are also part of what teachers need to build such relationships.

Lee (2005) comes to similar conclusions in her study of Hmong American high school students that she conducted in Wisconsin. She shows how many of the teachers in her study took no responsibility for students they considered to be culturally different. In other words, few teachers other than those designated as ESL instructors, believed that the school success of the Hmong students was their concern or something that they should monitor. On the other hand, students respected those teachers who knew something about their lives outside of school. Teachers and other school personnel who took the time to learn something about students’ cultural backgrounds and who found ways to explain both school and general life issues were those trusted by the students. The Hmong American students also complained about being isolated from mainstream students, about the exclusion of their culture and language from the curriculum, and about the lack of opportunities to discuss and learn about topics such as racism, which they believed exerted negative impacts on their lives.

In her book, Learning and not learning English, Guadalupe Valdés (2001) recognized that in the middle school where she collected her data the Mexican-origin students highly preferred a teacher who was direct and gruff to another teacher who was pleasant and soft-spoken. The difference between the two teachers, however, went beyond their communicative styles. The gruff teacher, for example, went out of her way to ask about students’ family members such as brothers and sisters, and she regularly sent greetings to their mothers and fathers. In other words, students felt much more closely connected to the teacher who seemed to care about their families and their lives outside the school. As a result, students made sure they introduced this teacher to their parents during open house and other evening functions.

In a 15-year ethnographic study of Mexican-origin, U.S. residents who refer to themselves as rancheros, which could be translated as ranchers, cowboys or even country people, Marcia Farr (2006) concluded that teachers and other educators have much more influence over students and their families than they realize. For rancheros, vigorous physical labor is highly valued as is a plain spoken, direct communication style that often seems rude and jarring to their fellow citizens from more urban backgrounds. Farr makes the case that stereotypes and misleading mainstream views of this population need to be replaced with more accurate and, often, much more positive portrayals,
and that by doing so, educators can avoid unintended insults and condescension. She notes that teachers often unwittingly make seemingly inconsequential comments that end up devastating or even, on occasion, alienating their students. Again, the point is that interpersonal relationships matter a great deal and they need careful handling that is grounded in informed understandings of the groups in question.

**Approaches to Building Relationships with Students**

Based on the preceding discussion and analysis of research on the experiences of ELLs, we recommend the following to educators who wish to improve these students’ academic experiences and outcomes. Like Nel Noddings, whose scholarship on the centrality of caring in educational reform is widely cited, we agree that, “Personal manifestations of care are probably more important in children’s lives than any particular curriculum or pattern of pedagogy.” (Noddings, 1995, p. 676). Therefore, we offer the importance of building relationships through integration, engaging students in a rigorous curriculum and maintaining a culturally sensitive stance.

**Integration** Segregation is an issue that surfaces frequently within the ethnographic literature on schooling for English language learners (Flores-González, 2002; Lee, 2005; Valdés, 2001). For example, Lee (2005) reported that Hmong American students felt isolated from students in the general education program in a public high school. There was a split between what she called “Americanized” Hmong youth and those who were in the process of learning English. All of the Hmong youths complained about a lack of contact with mainstream, native-English speaking European American students. The Americanized Hmong students believed that White students refused to socialize with Hmong students. By allowing groups of students to be isolated from one another, the school communicated an implicit message of ethnic and linguistic segregation. Educators need to find ways to interrupt such isolation through integration. If not, they risk complicity with isolationist policies and the negative messages these practices communicate, not only to those found within the school but also in the wider community. On an individual level, teachers also risk alienating students and any relationships they might hope to have with English language learners.

We recommend that teachers work toward finding ways to integrate ELL students into the school community by beginning to build strong relationships with their students. One way to begin this process is to create spaces and times where students can interact with native English speakers or other individuals who occupy socially desirable positions. This will help students begin to develop social networks and provide them with access to English. The building of friendship networks with high achieving students in and of itself has been shown to contribute to school completion for students from minority backgrounds (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). These spaces and times can involve projects in which ELLs work alongside native English speakers on topics like neighborhood reporting, local political events, or service opportunities. In addition to a large literature of quantitative effectiveness studies, cooperative learning approaches have been broadly documented in descriptive research as well. Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, and Wheeler (1996) claim that the traditional experimental evaluations of cooperative interventions have not resulted in successful wide-scale replications because these evaluations fail to adequately capture contextually sensitive factors. Utilizing an ethnographic approach, they documented the numerous ways that differences in students and group composition, differences in tasks and perceptions of tasks, and participant roles and the structure of the interaction all affected differential outcomes. In particular, they suggest that close monitoring and careful, sensitive tailoring of the activities by teachers was the most crucial aspect of successful implementation.

**Rigorous Instruction** Another frequently cited problematic issue in the ethnographic literature on ELLs is that of a lack of instruction designed to move students toward the twin goals of learning English and necessary subject or content material. Valdés (2001) detailed the types of instruction provided to the middle school students she studied, and found teachers frequently engaged students in the game of hangman, coloring, and a practice referred to as daily oral language. Daily Oral Language is an activity with only a bit more intellectual challenge than hangman and coloring. Here students are faced with a sentence written on the board that contains many spelling, grammatical, or punctuation errors. Students typically go to the board and correct one error at a time taking turns until the sentence is in standard form. None of these activities, however, are linked to the mainstream curriculum, are at a very low level of challenge, and do not help students learn English, particularly the English required to perform well in content areas such as science, social studies, and literature classes. Moreover, we find these activities to be generic and unresponsive to individual academic ability.

To provide ELLs with rigorous instruction, teachers will need to ensure that all coursework is grade-level appropriate, or when this is not possible, at least determine how each lesson moves students toward the goal of access to the mainstream curriculum. Successful alignment of instruction with state standards and local curricula demands that teachers know more than which pages to read on any given day; rather, teachers must know the prior knowledge, academic strengths and weaknesses, and demonstrated mastery of the material of their students, as well as family and community resources that are available to support in-school learning. Providing adequate opportunity to learn the curriculum is an affirmative obligation for teachers of ELLs, and opportunity to learn demands that instruction and curricula objectives adequately represent the standards to which students and schools are held accountable.
**Provision of Multicultural and Linguistically Sensitive Instruction**  Many of the researchers presented in this review emphasized the fact that ELLs received no instruction concerning their native language or any information about their national origin or their ethnic backgrounds. Valenzuela (1999), for example, noted that schooling in general, and many teachers in particular, failed to recognize the linguistic, cultural, and community-based knowledge of the students. She continues this line of reasoning by pointing out that this failure resulted in an active effort to subtract these resources from students’ lives. For example, few students of Mexican origin are able to study Spanish for the purpose of becoming literate in the language. Valenzuela demonstrates how second and third generation Mexican origin students struggle when they cannot speak or read and write Spanish and how these linguistic differences cause conflicts with recent Mexican immigrant students.

Valenzuela (1999) provides a classroom vignette in which Chicano students try to explain their understanding of what it means to not speak Spanish when so many people assume that they do. She argues that this issue strikes at the very core of many Mexican origin students’ identity and that it would not be a difficult issue for schools to address. For example, Spanish classes for Spanish speakers can be offered for full credit towards graduation, can provide students with literacy in the language, and could even be linked to students’ mainstream classes in ways that support students’ progress towards degree (Valdés, 2001; Potowski, 2004). Furthermore, a Spanish literature class could focus on providing students with necessary understandings and information needed to do well in English literature classes. These classes can even be offered in states that have effectively banned bilingual instructional approaches, as they would be considered foreign language instruction. Of course, there is no reason why these classes need to be limited to Spanish. Other languages could also be accommodated depending on the availability of personnel, local views toward minority languages, and legal restrictions. Teachers will also need to acquire relevant classroom and curricular materials that address the experiences of students and their communities and that meet local district and state standards. In other words, teachers should have access to as much information about as many immigrant groups served in their schools as is humanly possible. We understand that some schools serve many different groups but such a situation needs to be viewed as a potentially enriching experience for all students, not an insurmountable challenge. In other words, the oft heard objection that “we have so much diversity we cannot and should not do anything to address that diversity” is a canard that needs to be rejected. The selection of materials to address the existing diversity should include children’s and young adult literature on topics that are culturally relevant and familiar, informational texts that help students learn about their own communities and countries of origin, and digital materials such as dvds and videos whose topics include information about students’ cultures and languages.

**Recommendations**

1. Learn about your students, their families, and the communities they represent. At a minimum, such learning would include a brief overview of students’ communities, their history in the United States, cultural distinctiveness, and contributions to U.S. society. More importantly, however, we recommend that teachers learn as much as they can about the specific students in their own classrooms. There are many ways educators could accomplish the goal but we recommend teachers read novels written by members of these communities and compare the obstacles faced by the protagonists to issues faced by students in their classrooms.

2. Provide opportunities for students to develop their voice and also give them opportunities to assess and evaluate their school experiences. Ask them to rate the social climate of the school and elicit their ideas for how to make the school a more welcoming environment. When confronted by new, different cultural practices like early marriage, work to develop a non-judgmental response. One does not need to condone a practice to understand it. Use the opportunity to learn about the practice in question and consider whether it is in fact a cultural practice or a response to the conditions faced by immigrant students and their communities. In other words, find ways to let students speak about and hear about the immigrant experience in an ongoing and re-occurring fashion. Finally, learn the names of students’ family members and inquire about their well being as a regular practice.

**Conclusion**

There is much to be hopeful for when considering the academic outcomes for ELL students. To be sure, there are also important challenges yet to be met. In a very recent paper, Portes and Fernández-Kelly (2008) identify influential “significant others” or teachers as a major ingredient in the high academic achievement of some immigrant youths. Although meaningful cross-cultural relationships can be difficult to achieve, the literature that we reviewed provides useful and practical guidance to teachers and other educators willing to invest in the long-term success of their students who must learn English in addition to the various subject matters they encounter in U.S. schools.

**References**


