

Development of Second Language Learners' Linguistic and Cognitive Abilities

Elba Maldonado-Colon

Many instructional programs for second language learners require adaptation of instructional strategies and techniques from the manner in which they are conducted in classrooms across the United States. Wong Fillmore (1988) summarized prevailing instructional inadequacies which require significant revision in order to develop meaningful educational programs for second language learners. Low teacher expectations lead to a reduction of the content of lessons geared to these students, and underestimation of their ability prevents

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the incorporation of strategies aimed at developing advanced thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Another factor influencing this reductionist perspective is the belief that until students have mastered all locally targeted basic skills in the different academic areas, they cannot be introduced to advanced concepts. In response to these and other documented limitations in the instruction of second language learners (See Cummins, 1984), the literature now boasts a plethora of recommendations on methods, strategies, and approaches to assist teachers of second language learners¹.

This article will focus on several of the strategies I have had the opportunity to observe as they were implemented in classrooms where second language learners thrive. The strategies considered in the following sections facilitate the acquisition and development of several linguistic, academic, and conceptual skills and abilities. They have proven effective in involving students and in fostering the development of their basic study skills.

Before proceeding with the presentation of methods and strategies, a cautionary note is appropriate. A given strategy will not work for all students every time under all conditions, and the success of a strategy depends on its adequacy for the population involved and its implementation by the practitioner.

Fostering Linguistic and Cognitive Development

Storytelling

Children from many ethnic and socio-cultural groups are used to listening to stories at home as well as in school. Traditionally, these stories are told and directed by elders. The stories represent an organized text delivered verbally. The body of the text usually relates a series of events and descriptions, a transparent sequence, and some familiar cultural theme. The content is tailored to the capabilities of the listener, and its development is keyed on sustaining attention as well as presenting a challenge. Participants are encouraged to listen and in some cultures to join in the narrative.

To use this strategy effectively, teachers of second language learners should have their students join in the narration by asking them to volunteer, clarify, or extend the information presented. For example, the teacher, while telling a story about the woods, stops in the midst of the narrative and asks, "Well, how will ... (the name of the character) resolve this problem? Who has some ideas?" The students suggest several answers. Opportunities like these facilitate the development of listening, sequencing, thinking, and expressing oneself in ways that are culturally relevant to the students. A discussion on the suggested choices

can follow at the end of the story. The whys and why nots provide rich material to the learner and the teacher which increases the amount of shared information.

Many linguistic and academic skills can be fostered through this activity. Simple short stories are appropriate for young students. For younger students, teachers can use stories from children's literature. Fables, short stories, and myths are interesting and challenging for older students. Multicultural stories and myths are available in public and regional libraries. Oral histories known by members of the students' cultural community are also useful in this endeavor. For suggestions on how to incorporate this strategy into lessons, see Tiedt (1983).

Shared Literature

Like storytelling, shared literature becomes a vehicle to present language and concepts in ways that differ from the traditional manner in which basal readers present stories to children. Teachers select children's literature that they think the children will enjoy. Stories are grouped by "burden of print, or the demands made on the reader [or listener]" (Barrett, 1982). Usually, stories are introduced around a theme which is developed over a span of several days. Follow up activities like small group discussions and investigations on topics of interest extend the theme while reinforcing key concepts present in the story. In addition, an effective shared literature plan for each month provides multiple opportunities to develop many academic skills within an interesting and integrated context. Shared literature can be a vehicle to introduce and teach other skills. Teachers incorporate into their units the instruction of science and mathematical concepts, as well as conventions of effective communication. For information on strategies to implement shared literature in classrooms, consult Barrett (1982).

Advanced Organizers and Semantic Mapping

Psychologists hypothesize that knowledge is organized in our brains according to categories and relations (Anderson, 1985; diSessa, 1979). Evoking the name of a category triggers a set of associations related to elements within that category. Advanced instruction relies on this process. Unfortunately, this automatic triggering of related information does not always happen, especially in cases where the participants are not familiar with the stimulus or with the concept itself. Thus, the need to develop background before presenting topics becomes crucial in the instruction of these youngsters.

To assist in the development of information and the reduction of learning

gaps, teachers of second language learners make use of the advanced organizer and semantic mapping. The advanced organizer is the name of a category or a subcategory. When teachers plan to discuss a story like *The Storm Book* (Zolotow, 1952), they might use the word storm as an advanced organizer to collect ideas from the students and to develop the necessary background for comprehension of the story's narrative. Storm becomes the stimulus to develop different associations.

As the teacher collects information on the chalkboard from students, they begin to develop a conceptual map (semantic map) where information can be visually linked to identify or establish specific relationships. A semantic map is a visual strategy which focuses on the display of relationships represented throughout a text or stored in our minds. It is frequently used to relate the known to the novel by graphically conceptualizing content (Perhsson & Robinson, 1985). In the example above, the teacher uses the word storm as an organizer to help evoke images related to storms. And, as the students provide ideas, the teacher captures their information in a visual display like the one depicted in Figure 1. Once the students have listed what they know about storms, a discussion follows on the components or aspects of the image or images that the word evokes. This is important because frequently teachers erroneously assume that all learners share or have had access to the same or similar information. Children who come from other environments, whether cultural or social, might not always have encountered such information in a similar way. A storm in the Midwest and in the Pacific might have some similarities but will certainly have many differences. Thus, this strategy can be used to organize thoughts on a topic, to add or to develop new knowledge, or to synthesize information which might be too difficult to grasp from merely reading a text.

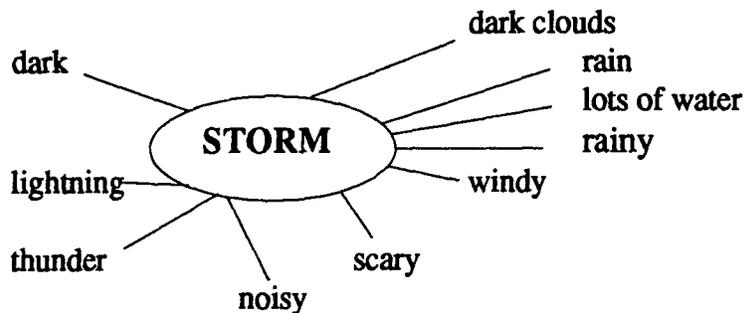


Figure 1. Advanced organizer and semantic map on storm.

Semantic mapping can also be used to develop or extend vocabulary, to increase the number of informed predictions in class discussions, and to improve

the development of written compositions (Mayo, 1980; Piccolo, 1987; Stark, 1987). For guidance and options on the implementation of this strategy, refer to Perhsson and Robinson (1985).

Frames

Students who are second language learners frequently require cues to guide them in reporting, developing summaries, establishing comparisons, and developing stories. Frames have been found to help teachers and learners present and explain the sequence of events in narratives. One example of this strategy is the circle story, a visual representation to guide students' comprehension and discussion of a story. Sequencing of events and development of stories is greatly improved as the strategy is adopted by the students. A circle story is plotted into the diagram of a circle. At zero degrees the character's adventure or problem begins. Moving clockwise, the character undergoes a series of adventures and ends close to the starting point (Jett-Simpson, 1981: 160). Another example of the use of frames is the one created by Stark (1987). The teacher provides students with a frame to initiate the development of a story. It has four vertical columns which include a column with the main parts of a story, a column for illustrations, one for key vocabulary and another for sentences. These columns intersect horizontally with three sections named setting, characters, and story problem. This strategy helps the students organize basic information to develop a narrative or a summary of a narrative.

Underlying the preceding strategies is the understanding that activities which draw heavily upon and encourage expression of personal experiences are effective in engaging students in both bilingual and mainstream classrooms (Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986; Willin & Swedo, 1987).

Fostering Writing Skills

Second language learners often exhibit great limitations in English writing skills, specifically the mechanics of writing, expressing ideas through written text, and composing narratives or expository material. The following strategies have proven to be effective in addressing some of these needs.

The Language Experience

The language experience can help second language learners collect their

thoughts on a topic, organize them, and develop a coherent text. Emerging from students' real life experiences or a group experience, thoughts and impressions are shared through class discussion. The teacher records the list of contributed comments on the chalkboard. Through a discussion of what is directly relevant to the topic and what conveys a clear message to the audience, both teachers and students select and modify those comments which convey clarity and order. Gradually, an organized text which follows writing conventions is developed for an audience. Teacher guidance helps direct the thinking process, models correct expression, and encourages editorial comments. Under such discovery guidance, the students gradually assume control of the development and editing of a narrative or expository text. Discovery guidance is implemented by the teacher through carefully developed questions that clarify, extend, and lead to modification of original contributions. Through this process students learn that even though what is said can be written, it requires editing in order to convey clarity and organization.

Today's competency-based tests evaluate editing abilities. Thus, teachers should consider the language experience as a technique to produce raw material to enhance the development of composition and editing skills. For additional strategies on using the language experience see Nessel and Jones (1981).

Sentence Expansion Through Conjoining and Embedding Exercises

The oral and written expression of some normal and second language learners often remains at the developmental level of basic sentences. Students need direct assistance to overcome this limitation. Such assistance should be in the form of oral discussions not worksheets. Exercises to practice embedding, that is, interjecting one independent clause in another or a dependent clause into an independent one, are necessary. Equally important is the use of connectors such as *and*, *but*, and *before* to relate two ideas stated in basic sentences. A five minute daily exercise using information that is of interest to students can help them develop greater flexibility in language usage, and concurrently, improve their comprehension and written expression. The students' narrations of events in their communities can become the raw material to practice embedding and conjoining. For example, students discuss in class the celebration of an important community meeting. The following statements are volunteered:

Mr. Lopez opened the meeting. He is the Chairman of the sponsoring association.

EMBEDDING: Mr. Lopez, the Chairman of the sponsoring association, opened the meeting.

There were many parents in that meeting. And teachers and other people came too.

CONJOINING: Parents, teachers and other people came to the meeting too.

Two strategies mentioned in the previous section are also effective for the development of writing skills: frames and semantic mapping. Consistent use of these academic strategies will assist second language learners in developing linguistic proficiencies which enhance their opportunities to learn more effectively from printed text and to communicate better in oral exchanges.

Modifications for Second Language Learners

The strategies described above and others to which the reader has been referred will work best with second language learners when teachers include the following three modifications in the traditional instructional plan: sufficient time, thematic instruction, and simplification.

Administration of Time

Sufficient time is essential in the instruction of second language learners. It involves allowing additional time for information processing as well as for selecting the material to be covered within a limited time span. In teaching procedures this means that instead of covering a story from the readers (basal series) each day, the teacher might have to select a few of the best stories and spend more time on them. Stories which elicit greater interest should be the ones chosen.

Thematic Instruction

Themes help to integrate and relate stories as well as other instructional areas and skills. Grouping stories under a theme helps students expand their knowledge and strengthen information networks. Themes help the teacher in adjusting, not watering down, the curriculum for second language learners. Selecting the best of what is available and focusing intensively on this regrouped content leads to effective instruction for second language learners, particularly those with greater linguistic and experiential limitations. For example, the teacher selects

five good stories from the nine available in the reader. The criteria for selection are stories that can be grouped under a theme and stories which will elicit high interest among students. Once the theme for the group and the selections have been identified, then the teacher proceeds to select vocabulary to be taught based on the linguistic level of the students. Some students will be able to work with more words than others, and to answer different types of questions, yet they will all be exposed to the same content and will benefit from the same general discussion of the stories. The discussion will assist with the development of shared information or background. Skills taught through the other stories not selected can be incorporated into this thematic group so that in dealing with less text, high quality instruction is delivered through the selection of a theme, selection of stories, and provision of sufficient time for the second language learner to be exposed to the reorganized presentation and incorporation of strategies covered in the stories not selected for direct instruction. In such manner curriculum is not watered down but modified for a learner who requires more time and more integration.

Simplification

Simplification as it is used here is not equivalent to watering down instruction either. Simplification is the editing of linguistic expression by expanding sentences, paraphrasing, listening to key parts of recorded messages instead of the whole message, and providing students with outlines of what has been taught and discussed. Simplification in reading would translate to highlighting important passages in the students' textbook and in worksheets, thus helping students focus on the marked passages rather than on the full text. Simplification in writing means focusing on the development of expression rather than on the numerous grammatical errors which second language learners tend to make in the process of acquiring English. Curriculum simplification means grouping by themes and identifying the most important and related skills and concepts to be taught throughout the development of such themes.

Conclusion

Well-organized and well-coordinated planning which takes into consideration how learners learn through a second language and which strategies help them succeed in their efforts help both teachers and students improve instructional and learning effectiveness (Fradd, 1987; Maldonado-Colon, 1989). This article

summarizes strategies and concepts which have been implemented in classrooms where second language learners thrive. It presents a challenge to researchers to document effectiveness in areas in which practice has assumed leadership.

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¹For an in-depth study of techniques and strategies to assist second language learners, consult the following authors: Chamot (1985), Cummins (1989), Fradd (1987), Freeman & Freeman (1988), Hamayan & Pflieger (1987), Maldonado-Colon (1989), and Willig, Swedo, & Ortiz (1987).

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