Voices of the Teachers: Reading Comprehension Strategies that Work for English-Language Learners

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- This paper assesses selected recommendations made by five exemplary bilingual teachers regarding strategies for teaching reading comprehension skills and examines how these skills allow students to increase their reading comprehension and overall academic competence.

Introduction

Soon after I began teaching a bilingual fifth-grade class, I noticed that students had problems in comprehending what they were reading. Students were more preoccupied with decoding the text than with extracting meaning from it. All too often students could not remember what they had read. Even more troubling was their unawareness of what was required of them as learners. These students did not know that content-oriented reading requires much more than the phonological interpretation of text. It requires that students become aware of their role as active readers and learners. Two main questions emerged from my experiences with the fifth grade students. What are the strategies experienced educators employ in teaching metacognitive and other reading skills to English-language learners (ELLs)? How do these skills enable students to become independent learners?

In search of answers to these questions I interviewed five exemplary bilingual teachers Caprice, Marta, Carlos E., Raquel and Tina—and asked them to share effective ways to promote reading comprehension and learning among ELLs. All of the teachers had a bilingual credential in addition to either a Master’s in reading or a reading credential. An unexpected commonality among them was that they all learned English as a second language. They taught pupils between the ages of seven and eleven years in five different primary grades. The teachers had an average of nine years of experience in bilingual classrooms. I also sought support for the five teachers' comments, from the academic literature.

These teachers agreed that for ELLs to succeed in school they need to be taught reading skills through all content areas. All teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, must be prepared to teach reading skills since reading expository text can be one of the most challenging activities ELLs have to do in school. Duke (2000) noted that “the ability to read and write informational texts is one form of semiotic capital valued in multiple settings in advanced schooling, community, and work. An important mission of schooling in the U.S. is to develop this ability in students. As noted earlier, a large number of students are unable to read and write informational text critically and well, and this is disproportionately true for students from traditionally disenfranchised social groups.” (p.205)

Content Reading

Second-language learners often times find expository text overwhelming because they do not have the language proficiency or the skills required to understand and learn subject matter (Dresser, 2000). These teachers agreed that in order to assist ELLs, teachers have to equip students with the necessary skills that help them overcome their reading and learning difficulties. They do not recommend that teachers wait five to seven years, which has been found to be the time necessary for ELLs to become proficient in English, to expose them to expository text (Cummins, 1989, & Hakuta, 1997). Instead, they recommend that teachers embed the teaching of reading strategies in the curriculum.

Reading narrative text is very different than reading informational text. When students read a story for pleasure they are not required to remember what they read because they read purely for enjoyment and not for learning. Reading a science textbook is very different because students are not only expected to understand what they read but also to remember the content (Mathew & Kimbell-Lopez, 2003). Students must be equipped, therefore, with the skills required for learning and adequate thinking (Guthrie &
To cultivate such skills each of the participating teachers used an array of reading strategies in their classrooms. Five of the most effective strategies will be discussed below: (a) sheltering the instruction, (b) small group-work, (c) learning vocabulary, (d) self-monitoring, and (e) taking remedial action.

Teachers must look for ways to shelter the instruction. In doing this, teachers need to be aware that there are three main goals for content instruction: 1) content learning, 2) language development and 3) general skills development (Cloud, Genesse & Hamayan, 2000). When reading expository text, students learn specific vocabulary and language required to understand the subject matter. Students also learn study skills that help them not only to communicate in the language of the subject, but also "communicate about the subject by creating meaning" (Hernández, 2005, p. 132). Therefore, it is imperative that ELLs be given complex text and other forms of expository text because as Carlos commented, "not exposing students to books is not the solution". The solution is to have students read appropriate grade level text while providing them with enough sheltered instruction so that they can successfully acquire the knowledge and necessary language to succeed in school. Some of the techniques used in sheltered instruction include building on students' prior knowledge, utilizing concrete materials and students' experiences, designing activities that promote collaboration, and explicitly teaching reading and learning strategies (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

Via the second strategy, Marta worked with small groups to assist ELLs in comprehending and learning complex subject matter. She worked with a group of ten students while the remainder of the class completed an assignment at their desks. She strongly believes that "children who are learning, and unless they are very proficient in the language, you would not expect them to [master subject matter] by themselves because of the vocabulary". Small group activities give students and teachers the opportunity to engage in dialogue and to discuss topics and issues that are relevant to the students’ own experiences and backgrounds (Ruddell, 2002). Marta also found that in small group instruction it is easier to teach effective reading strategies. As a result of small group instruction, Marta found that her students' reading comprehension increased. Her students learned new vocabulary and content; participated more willingly in oral discussions; and most important of all gained confidence as readers.

Learning new vocabulary is the third strategy. Teachers taught their students that proficient readers do their best to extract meaning from the text by reading the entire selection. Good readers make a note of words they do not know and then continue reading. If they lose comprehension, they first try to make sense of the reading by accessing their background knowledge and connecting the new information to preceding sentences (Van Den Broke, Kremer, 2000). If this fails, Caprice taught her students a technique called "interactive editing." She had her students re-read the passage several times. She asked them to select "important" words they did not understand. The students later shared the words with the class and together they found the meaning of each word. At the end, students were asked to write a summary of the passage utilizing the "important" words selected by the children. Teachers found that students continued utilizing these strategies even during free reading or sustained silent reading time. Students also became "word conscious" which, according to Graves (2000), is a disposition that is both affective and cognitive (p.127). This means that students not only learned a vast vocabulary but also were eager to learn new words.

The fourth strategy, self-monitoring, helps students assess their own work and encourages them to take remedial action (Brown, 1980). Tina commented that she was concerned that often times teachers expect very little from ELLs. Children need to be able to monitor their own work and search for ways to solve their own reading and learning difficulties. Caprice added, "reading can be very frustrating for many children that do not have the skills and strategies to solve their own problems. They are not going to have a teacher next to them at all times helping them, therefore, that is why we need to teach them to assess their own progress." Marta and Carlos found that a strategy that promotes self-assessment is asking students to provide a rationale for answering questions the way they did. They found that in most of the cases, students would notice that their response was incorrect and immediately search for ways to correct their error. Marta added, "this post-questioning process brings students to a higher level of thinking, because students are not only expected to respond to a question, but to explain how they arrived at the answer."

Tina also taught self-monitoring skills through "summarizing" a technique that assists students in monitoring their own production and learning goals. First, she photocopied a selection from the textbook and told the children they were allow to write and
take notes on the page provided. She had students read one paragraph. When they completed the reading, students were to ask themselves one question. “Did I understand?” In other words, they were asked to rethink about what they had just read. Tina then had students summarize the reading aloud or write a short summary as margin notes next to each paragraph. Tina found that by reading one paragraph at a time, “they can go back and review one chunk at a time versus reading through the entire text.” The students found this strategy helpful because, unlike when they use textbooks, they were allowed to write, draw, make symbols and take notes on the margin of the photocopied selection to represent key ideas from the reading. As a result, students mentioned that they were able to remember the material better.

Taking remedial action, the fifth strategy, was found to be one of the most critical strategies students need to learn. Students must be taught that proficient readers need problem-solving strategies to be able to comprehend and remember content (Freeman & Goetz Person, 1998). Participating teachers taught their students that all readers encounter difficulties. Only proficient readers, however, have problem-solving strategies that assist them in overcoming their reading difficulties. Students were also taught that in order to overcome their reading obstacles they need to go back and highlight important information, reread the questions, reread the text, divide the text into topics, take notes, look at captions, write an outline, organize the material, and summarize the reading. It is imperative that teachers involve ELLs and other delayed readers in problem-solving activities and discussions because these activities will promote social integration, second language development and content learning (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). These teachers found that this strategy assisted their students in becoming more proactive learners who understood that they were ultimately in charge of their own learning.

Concluding Thoughts
The participating teachers provided a great deal of insight and knowledge, as the above discussion documents. These teachers believe that in order to prevent ELLs and other delayed readers from failing at school, educators must help students become aware of their own thinking processes and equip them with reading strategies that assist them in comprehending and learning content subject matter. All of the participating teachers believe that there is a clear relationship between reading ability and academic achievement. They did not feel that tracking or other remedial programs are the answer to the academic problems for ELLs. On the contrary, they found these programs to be discriminatory and alienating. A better solution to reading problems was to have flexible grouping of students. It was recommended that students be placed in groups by ability level and that students be assessed frequently. Students should immediately be reassigned to a more advanced group when they achieve the level necessary to change groups.

Students become independent learners in a classroom environment that encourages them to be critical thinkers and active learners. They must read cognitively demanding text, assess their own progress and take remedial action when necessary (Brown, 1980). Because as Raquel commented “the bottom line is that to succeed in school, ELLs need to be good readers.”

References


This lesson provides useful reading comprehension strategies for English language learners. Reading Comprehension Strategies.

**Read Carefully & Get the Gist.** What is the text mainly about? What questions are you asking yourself? What do you notice right away? Circle words that you don’t understand. Use context clues to figure out unknown words. Read Again & Dig Deeper. With these 5 amazing strategies, you’ll give them reading comprehension survival skills for life! The reader may argue that the teacher could have dealt with the student himself or herself if the remark made was not very offensive. For the student to be brought to the principal’s attention will signal to the reader that the student must have demonstrated disrespect, possibly by spewing abuse at the teacher. As illustrated above, awareness of contextual cues can help your students guess meanings of unfamiliar words in context.

Guessing unfamiliar words from contextual cues trains English language learners not to be too reliant on a dictionary. When students are heavily dependent on a dictionary, their reading fluency and comprehension can be disrupted. Reading Comprehension Strategies That Work. by Susan Verner 27,263 views. Reading. As one of the core skills in learning English as a second language, you know it’s important. But exactly what elements of reading should be the priority as you teach your ESL students? As an ESL teacher, building vocabulary is part of every class you teach, but here are some specific ways to accomplish that during reading class. Use picture dictionaries or illustrated stories and other visuals to help teach unfamiliar vocabulary without translation to L1. These ideas will help your students increase their reading comprehension of specific texts as well as give them the tools and strategies they need to understand what they read in the future. Ruiz McLafferty, Ana Marie, "Listening Strategies for English Language Learner Comprehension, a Teacher Resource Guide" (2015). School of Education Student Capstone Theses and Dissertations. 267. https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_all/267. This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at DigitalCommons@Hamline. One strategy may be to familiarize students with listening to a variety of voices on a recording before they answer questions. Students need more listening support in the classroom. If I provided students with listening support, they may have shown more improvement or had a better chance in applying their listening skills.