Teaching English Language Learners In The Modern Classroom

Personal Topical Essay

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During my Wednesday observations, I was placed at Lambrick Park Secondary and noticed that, although a large amount of the students were English Language Learners (ELL), the teachers had not adjusted their teaching to best incorporate ELL learners. ELL students are an increasingly large population of students in the public school system, as Canada has seen an increase in immigration and international programs. However, because of this large increase in students throughout North America, there is a large amount of research available to adapt pedagogy to best engage both ELL students and native-English-speakers. These methods include creating a high-challenge high support classroom, providing ELL students with a chance to work with English speaking peers, having a flipped classroom, using multimodality and using performance-based assessments that relate to the individuals.

Lambrick Park Secondary is a school of fewer than 600 students. A large portion of the students come from the International Program, which accepts ELL students from all over the world. Lambrick Park Secondary also has immigrant students, who are learning English. I have noticed that the English Language Learners tend to sit in one area of the room and either disengage with the class or depend on the use of translation apps to succeed. Through interviewing teachers, I found out that one of the biggest challenges of teaching English Language Learners is that many ELL students plagiarise their homework by copying and pasting information from the internet. In addition, teachers also mentioned having trouble getting ELL students to participate outside of their ELL class. Lambrick Park provides International students with classes that are meant to prepare them for studying English Language Arts and Social Studies in English. Although the classes focus on

teaching the fundamentals of English that the students need, these preparatory

classes last only one semester and do not provide the students with an opportunity

to work with native-English-speaking peers. Furthermore, I have noticed that many

teachers are still not adapting their pedagogy in English Language Arts classrooms

to best engage English Language Learners, which is important, as they are

increasing in number within the North American public school system.

      In the United States, from 2002 to 2011, the percent of English Language

Learners increased by 14 percent. However, the total amount of students only grew

by 2 percent (Echevarria, Vgot, Short, 2015). In 2014 Vancouver British Columbia,

ELL students were the majority in over 60 schools (Skelton, 2014). Of the students

who attend Public schools in B.C, one in ten is an English Language Learner and

another one in ten has a significant learning disability (Skelton, 2014). More recently,

as of 2019, 68,982 students are registered as English Language learners in British

Columbia (Ip, 2019). Although these stats are high, it is important to know that these

are only the students who are registered English Language Learners and receive

funding. These students are funded for a maximum of five years in SD61 ("English

Language Learner", SD61, 2019). After these five years, students may require

English support but they are no longer funded.

      Due to the large increase in English Language Learners, there are many

researched techniques to help build a classroom where both native-English speakers

and ELL students can thrive. One method is to provide a supportive and challenging

classroom environment. In Pauline Gibbon's book *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding

Learning: Teaching English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom,* they

write that studies have proven "in a high-challenge, high-support curriculum equity

gaps diminish and all learners, regardless of background, achieve at higher levels."

(Gibbons, 2015, pp. 18). To create a high challenge, high support classroom

teachers need to use their knowledge on the Zone of Proximal Development coined

by Lev Vygotsky and scaffold students to keep them adequately supported while

being pushed to pursue more challenging material. Therefore, for English Language

Learning students "rather than simplifying the tasks [...] we should instead reflect on

the nature of the scaffolding that is being provided" (Gibbons, 2015, pp. 18). In order

for both native English speakers and English Language Learners to thrive, the

teacher must find an appropriate balance between challenging them and providing

help.

One method of scaffolding English Language Learners is providing ample

opportunity to work with native-English-speaking peers. As mentioned earlier,

Lambrick Park provides their International students with two courses to prepare them

for their English and Social studies classes. These courses are only with English

Language Learners and do not provide any chance to work with

native-English-speaking peers. When ELL students begin their regular English

classes, they usually choose to sit with fellow English Language Learners who they

have already formed friendships with. Through my observations, the International

students do not seem to form many friendships with students outside of the

International program and seem more comfortable sticking together.

According to Anny Fritzen Case's article *Beyond the Language Barrier:*

Opening Spaces for ELL/Non-ELL Interaction, English Language Learning students

who are segregated in classes speak a lot of English in their ELL class but not when

they are put into classes with native English speakers (Case, 2015). I have noticed

that among the ELL students at Lambrick there are some that are vocal and willing to contribute to their English Language Learning classes but are reserved in their other courses. Case states that, "While their level of English proficiency [is] the same in both contexts[Mixed and non-mixed ELL classes], the social dynamics, school culture, and institutional structures [present] different conditions for language use" (Case, 2015, pp. 364). In my opinion, these students are not learning English well enough to socialize inside and outside of school, but are learning academic language that cannot be used in a social context. In Case's study, the school provided the students with a chance to create a digital video together in a mixed setting of English Language Learners and native English speakers (Case, 2015, pp. 372). This classroom activity could be used because one of the big ideas of the English Language Arts curriculum in British Columbia for grade 9 is, "Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and the world" (B.C's New Curriculum, https://curriculum. gov.bc.ca/curriculum/english-language-arts/9). Therefore this activity, although originally done in the United States, would be useful in British Columbia, as well. Moreover, Case reflects that having the students work together "created a familiarity with each other, a shared purpose, and the seeds of friendship, cultivated not because [they] eliminated the language barrier, but perhaps because [they] simply kept talking" (Case, 2015, pp. 380). This is useful because it allows students to gain "soft skills" that they can use outside of the classroom.

Another technique for creating engagement for English Language Learners is the approach of flipping the classroom. In Hsiu-Ting Hung's article *Flipping the Classroom for English Language Learners to Foster Active Learning*, Hung studied

the success of three different classrooms for English Language Learners: a traditional non-flipped classroom, a semi-structured flipped classroom and a fully structured flipped classroom through the online program, WebQuest (Hung, 2015, pp. 81). Overall, the fully flipped and structured classroom provided the most positive results, both in the English Language learner's achievement, and their personal engagement and enjoyment (Hung, 2015). The WebQuest programming focused on active learning strategies, including "group discussions, case studies, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and inquiry-based learning" (Hung, 2015, pp. 82). The classroom was "flipped", meaning that students had the opportunity to learn the materials through multimodal means online and the class time focused on inquiry-based projects and work time (Hung, 2015, pp. 87).

Overall, the WebQuest programming is just one example of how a teacher can adapt their classroom to promote active learning techniques and the success that ELL students have with them. Personally, I think this study highlights the aspects of active learning, inquiry, personalization and multimodality that both our class and B.C's new curriculum are supporting. For example, the new curriculum's core curricular competencies in the grade nine level say that students should be able to "Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking" and to "construct meaningful personal connections between self, text and the worlds" (B.C's New Curriculum, https://curriculum.gov.bc. ca/ curriculum/english-language-arts/9). These different multimodal tasks and hands-on inquiry projects are great for English Language Learners who can be intimidated by talking about subjects that are more academic.

Finally, teachers need to adapt their assessment for English Language

Learners to fit the students' assignments and learning. In Margo DelliCarpini's article

Success with ELLs: Authentic Assessment for ELLs in the ELA Classroom they

state, "traditional classroom assessments, like standardized tests, are dependent on

language and provide little to no information on ELL's understanding of concepts"

(DelliCarpini, 2009, pp. 117). Instead, students need to be provided with clear

specific outlines and specific guidelines (DelliCarpini, 2009). Moreover, DelliCrapini

notes that one of the most motivating things a teacher can do is make immediate

connections between students' lives and the curriculum (DelliCarpini, 2009). This

pedagogy is reflected in the new English Language Arts B.C curriculum which asks

teachers to connect the texts or materials to the students' personal or cultural

identities. Again, these two elements of assessment are beneficial for native English

Speakers and English Language Learners alike, as they both can benefit from clear

outlined instruction and a personal connection to the material.

DelliCarpini suggests two different types of assessment that have great

success for English Language Learners. The first is to provide the opportunity for

peer feedback because "The ELLs' motivation can be enhanced, their

self-confidence increased, and their sense of connection to their mainstream peers

developed through well-constructed peer-feedback opportunities" (DelliCarpini, 2009,

pp. 118). This would also allow the English Language Learners to form connections

with students who are native English speakers in a mixed classroom. DelliCarpini

also suggests introducing performance-based assessments that show the

knowledge students have gained in a context that matches their current

developmental level (DelliCarpini, 2009). Performance-based assessment allows for

teachers to have the opportunity to better understand and know their students'
diverse learning needs and in turn, "increase knowledge and confidence [that] will
enhance performance on the necessary traditional assessments" (DelliCarpini, 2009,
pp. 119).

       Overall, a teacher has many unique students that they are constantly hoping
to engage, educate and inspire. As a future English Language Arts teacher, I want
my classroom to have ample opportunities to engage both English Language
Learners and native English speakers alike. Certain practices, such as multimodality,
performance-based assessment, allowing group work between English Language
Learners and native English speakers, and creating a high challenge high-support
classroom will give all students a chance to excel in the English Language Arts
classroom. I understand that teachers have diverse classrooms with many needs but
I think the practices of making the classroom more accessible for English Language
Learners will lead to better results for all learners. Because of the increasing number
of immigrants and international students in the modern classroom, I think teachers
need to evaluate and adapt their pedagogy to best suit all students.

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