

UC Berkeley
The CATESOL Journal

Title

How Can We Encourage Active Learning Strategies in Content-Based Second Language Instruction?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bk6b6hk>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 5(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

Author

Kinsella, Kate

Publication Date

1992

DOI

10.5070/B5.36614

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

How Can We Encourage Active Learning Strategies in Content-Based Second Language Instruction?

KATE KINSELLA

San Francisco State University and San Francisco Unified School District

As educators of language minority students, we know that schooling does far more than teach academic subject matter. It can dramatically shape students' world views, mold their images of themselves and their communities, and position them in society. Paulo Freire (1973) maintains that a principle purpose of education should be to encourage learners to believe in themselves and convince them that they have valued knowledge and experiences. I believe that second language instruction should go even further and equip students with active learning strategies which will enable them to demonstrate capably their special expertise and provide access to new knowledge. Unfortunately, school often does just the opposite, making language minority students question the existence or value of their knowledge and skills, which in turn contributes to a poor self-image and academic performance.

As an example, a high school student with limited English proficiency (LEP) who has mastered the new vocabulary and concepts in a lesson and studied conscientiously may perform poorly on a test because she lacks the academic language to interpret correctly the test directions. If presented with the essay question in a U.S. history class, "Trace the early waves of immigration to the U.S.," she is apt to respond to the phrase "early immigration," completely disregarding the key direction word *trace* and write whatever she can recollect from the unit, with no clear focus or organization.

Essay questions are generally graded on two criteria: what the writer says and how the writer says it. It is not enough, then, for a student to include the correct information in a series of connected sentences. The information must be presented in a logical, organized way—reflecting the task demands of the particular direction words—and must demonstrate the writer's understanding of the subject. Because she lacks the strategy for providing the called-for chronological description, she will most likely receive a grade which doesn't reflect her true understanding of the subject matter.

In order to perform well on standardized and teacher-constructed tests, LEP students need to be familiar with varied test formats and have the language proficiency to interpret accurately a wide range of test directions and questions. They need strategies to effectively answer both objective (e.g., true/false, multiple choice) and subjective (e.g., essay, short answer) test questions.

But where in grades 6 through 12 do LEP students actually have the opportunity to develop crucial academic competencies such as test taking, lecture note taking, or textbook reading and studying—competencies which will enable them to advance successfully through the core curricula and thus have an equal opportunity to attend college?

The sheltered English class would seem the logical place for LEP students to begin this developmental process. Students whose English is newly emerging should properly be placed in content courses taught in their primary language. At the level of intermediate fluency in English students have acquired the receptive and productive skills which allow them to negotiate both spoken and contextual meanings in English. They are then ideally suited for the sheltered classroom and for the task demands of academic skill building in English.

An examination of the principles and practices underlying sheltered English instruction makes it clear why the sheltered classroom is potentially the ideal place to introduce academic skill building and active learning strategies. In sheltered English classes, content-area teachers employ principles of successful ESL instruction which have been greatly influenced by research on second language acquisition. The work of Jim Cummins (1981) has had a decisive impact on methodology by helping us see the distinction between language used for social and academic purposes. Social language (*basic interpersonal communication skills* or *BICS*) enables students to participate in everyday informal communicative exchanges. It is the language students use among themselves on the school playground and in the classroom. More critical to success in secondary and postsecondary schools, however, is academic language (*cognitive academic language proficiency* or *CALP*), which enables students to deal with cognitively demanding language tasks at school: formal lectures; textbooks in social science, science, and mainstream English classes; and both teacher-constructed and standardized tests.

One of the keys to mastery of more cognitively demanding academic material is *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985)—in other words, new language and concepts easily understood by the learner. Comprehensibility sets the stage for learning and academic mastery. After planning topically focused lessons that integrate language skills, teachers then provide contextual clues that are embedded in content with realia, visuals, models, and manipulatives. They also enhance comprehensibility for LEP students through the use of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, charts, and semantic maps. Sheltered

English methodology reflects additional principles of successful second language acquisition and ESL instruction, which as described by Curtain (1986), include focusing on meaning rather than on form, avoiding excessive error correction, providing students with simplified English to increase comprehensibility of concepts and language, and involving students in meaningful interaction. Richard-Amato and Snow (1992) emphasize the distinction between language skills and cognitive skills and suggest that in sheltered classes instructors take into careful consideration the linguistic demands of their content area and also guide their students in developing the learning strategies necessary for mastering content material.

From this composite description of the methodology employed in sheltered English classes (see also Glaudini Rosen in this volume for additional strategies), it seems reasonable to expect that ESL students are here acquiring the language and concepts they need to advance in core curricula as well as the active learning and study skills they need to succeed in mainstream classes. Frequently, however, in sheltered classes, the focus is placed on providing comprehensible input in the form of vocabulary and concept development to increase ESL learners' ability to understand the particular lesson of the day, not on the development of active learning processes which these students can carry with them beyond the sheltered classroom.

Sheltered instruction has been criticized for watering down the curriculum, though skilled instructors in sheltered classes know that by facilitating engagement and interaction with academic concepts, they enrich and contextualize the curriculum. Nonetheless, we must examine the extent to which we inadvertently function as institutional "gatekeepers" (Erickson & Shultz, 1982), denying our students social mobility within the school system, when we spend the majority of class time making our lessons more accessible for our students without allocating sufficient time for the development of both the CALP and the active learning processes vital to completion of more complex academic reading and writing assignments or examinations. Our students may very well emerge from our sheltered U.S. history lesson with a deeper understanding of the early waves of immigration to the U.S.; however, they may be no better equipped to tackle the next textbook chapter on their own, take effective lecture notes, prepare for an upcoming exam, or competently answer an essay question.

As advocates of educational equity for language minority students and as agents of social change, we must seek and share practices which enable and extend our students' voices. We cannot wait until our students are ready to enter mainstream classes to develop academic survival skills; in fact, we cannot even safely assume that their mainstream instructors are able or willing to assume any responsibility for this critical skill development. The leadership role lies with the instructors who best understand the learning needs and styles of language minority students. We must therefore infuse our ESL and

sheltered English classes with multiple opportunities for our students to acquire a wide range of CALP and to better understand how to learn in and across various disciplines.

We can do this by critically examining the content areas for which we are preparing our ESL students. After identifying key academic competencies for the individual content areas, we must thoughtfully analyze the steps involved in the development of each skill. We should take our students carefully through the steps involved in each skill and provide them with regular, structured classroom opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and ultimately master these skills.

As an illustration, in workshops which I conduct with secondary and college content area faculty, I introduce a process-oriented approach which enables LEP students to develop the vocabulary and active learning strategies necessary to accurately read and respond to short-answer and essay test questions.

A first step in developing students' test-taking competencies is to identify high frequency direction words (i.e., those most commonly used in specific content areas and/or used widely across disciplines). Content area faculty I have worked with generally suggest the following key direction words: analyze, compare, contrast, define, describe, discuss, explain, evaluate, illustrate, justify, state, summarize. The next step is to familiarize students with these terms. However, simply providing LEP students with an extensive list of direction words and their definitions does little to build their test-taking competencies and delivers the message that academic skills will be difficult if not impossible to master.

A more effective way to help LEP students better internalize the distinct meanings of direction words is to provide them with a limited list of high frequency direction words and their definitions, then provide multiple opportunities for them to complete short tasks using these different words to write about topics familiar to them. If students are allowed to write about topics which are grounded in their lives and interests, the focus can be placed on development of test-taking CALP and strategies rather than on a struggle to generate adequate support for the topic. Topics which I have used very successfully with high school LEP students include: "My Job," "My Hobby," "My Study Place," "My Best Friend," "My Favorite Class," and "An Important Decision." For the initial series of writing activities, I assign the topic "My Study Place" after a lively class discussion of criteria for an effective study environment. Students find it to be an easy and accessible topic, one that lends itself to graphic "showing" and that can be discussed in distinctly different ways.

The students then write four paragraphs about their most frequent study place, selecting from these direction words: define, describe, analyze, contrast, compare, evaluate, justify. After completing these short paragraphs, the students exchange papers and try to identify which four direction words their partner has selected, justifying their

decisions with clear evidence from the paragraphs. I teach them how to recognize the signals for different paragraph types; for example, a comparison can be identified by paragraph signals such as *similarly* and *in comparison*. These writing samples then provide the instructor with a wealth of material for additional activities, all of which further help the students internalize the distinct meanings of the direction words and develop their analytical reading ability. I use the overhead projector to show a variety of writing samples from the batch to the entire class. I first ask the students to identify response types and to justify their decisions. To do so, I show them a range of the student writing samples, then place them in groups to collaborate on deciding what type of directions the writer must have received. I also ask them to analyze varied responses to specific directions to determine whether the writers have responded appropriately. For example, I might show them three paragraphs in which the writers were asked to evaluate their usual study place, then ask the class to specify what made the individual responses successful or unsuccessful written evaluations.

Another way to regularly recycle test direction words is by substituting them for the simplified terms and tasks used predominantly in sheltered materials. In an examination of the task demands in three sheltered U.S. history texts, I found that all too frequently students are merely asked to list, tell, or answer a *What is/are*-question, when with adequate preparation, they can easily be asked to define, compare, analyze, or describe. A student with limited English proficiency is capable of mastering CALP as vital to academic achievement as the terms used prevalently on standardized and mainstream instructor-constructed exams. We can facilitate this critical language development by introducing new direction words in manageable doses, one or two at a time, and refraining from adding any new direction terms before the students demonstrate genuine mastery of their existing lexicon of test terminology. By introducing a few new direction words at a time, then regularly recycling these directions in homework assignments and classroom activities, students in no time can effectively respond to the distinct task demands. They also can be challenged to engage in integrated language arts activities which are cognitively demanding and which enhance critical thinking skills.

Essay test-taking strategies are only part of the vital repertoire of active learning and study strategies our language minority students must develop to succeed across the curriculum, a repertoire which also includes lecture note-taking strategies, textbook reading and study strategies, and vocabulary expansion strategies.

Many educational researchers and scholars agree that the focus of both equality and excellence in education is maximum development of the personal talents of all students. By merely providing our LEP students with enough comprehensible input to have access to our lessons, we do not sufficiently develop their talents. When language

minority students also learn how to learn across the disciplines, they can have access to quality knowledge without our facilitation. We should, therefore, strive to first provide our students with "input + 1" then advance to "sheltered English + 1." That is, we can continue to use our ESL methodology to enrich and contextualize the content area curriculum while we also manageably and steadily build active student strategies. With this language development and vital academic skill building, language minority students can see that they have a genuine chance, that they are indeed prepared to succeed in higher education. ■

References

- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education, *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 3-49). Los Angeles: California State University, Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center.
- Curtain, H. A. (1986). Integrating language and content instruction. *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin*, 9(2), 1, 10-11.
- Erickson, F., & Shultz, J. (1982). *The counselor as gatekeeper*. New York: Academic Press.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- Richard-Amato, P. A., & Snow, M. A. (1992). *The multicultural classroom*. New York: Longman.