ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS

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Powering Up Biliteracy: The Benefits of Reciprocity in Reading and Writing

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Introduction

A second-grade dual language teacher struggles with ways to keep on task with the district's language arts department require-ments of how to teach reading and writing. In addition, the teacher has to consider the language-of-the-day specifics for the dual language program the district has adopted. In the class, are two new Spanish-speaking students from Central America and Mexico, five who are English dominant, and six who speak varying levels of Spanish and English. Where does one begin?

The above scenario is typical of what countless dual language teachers in suburban or urban school districts deal with on a daily basis as they are challenged to educate students with many different types of language needs. Among diverse students, some lack English skills, others have limited English and native literacy; in addition some students may lack quality early educational experiences because of their families' limited financial resources. The process of immigration to this country can also add another dimension to the complexity of differentiating instruction or even where to begin in terms of educational intervention.

The makeup of students in the United States has become increasingly more diverse in grades PK-12. Teachers today are more likely than ever to have linguistically diverse students in their classrooms, even in schools with historically white, middle-class, English-speaking populations. The changes in demographic patterns in the last few decades have created unique challenges for educators and opportunities for those who truly want to address the academic needs of students that come from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2005). These students are usually referred to as English language learners (ELLs) or simply English learners (ELs).

According to the U.S. Census, the total K-12 enrollment grew 12 percent, from 45,443,389 in 1993 to 49,619,090 in 2003. In contrast, ELLs' enrollment increased by 65 percent, from 3,037,922 students to 5,013,539 between 1993 and 2003. Of the 53.2 million children enrolled in K-12 classrooms, nearly 5 million children are not proficient in English. Between 1979 and 2004, the number of school-aged children (ages 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 9.9 million (from 9-19 percent). Approximately 80 percent of ELLs are from Spanish-speaking families and are more likely to come from lower economic and educational backgrounds (Fry, 2008; Kohler & Lazarín, 2007; Soltero, 2011).

With all the educational challenges facing ELLs, many progressive school districts have adopted and embraced dual language programs to meet essential linguistic and literacy goals necessary for academic success. Therefore, the teacher in the introductory scenario at least has some district support for educating her linguistically diverse students. In dual

language programs, ELLs are not required to wait until they are proficient in conversational or academic English before they start mastering academic content (Alecio-Lara, Galloway, Irby, Gómez & Rodríguez, 2004; Gómez & Ruíz-Escalante, 2005). Unlike previous early-exit transitional bilingual programs, students in dual language programs receive support to learn English and at the same time keep up with grade-level content in their first language (Estrada, Gómez, & Ruíz-Escalante, 2009).

R. Gómez (2006) reported that 366 schools in Texas had adopted the Gómez and Gómez dual language model. Gómez also reported that "students who studied under this model for at least three years achieved at high[er] levels of academic proficiency, as measured by statewide assessments" (Gómez, 2006, p. 57). Therefore, biliteracy development is a primary goal of this model. Reading and writing are reciprocal processes, and powerful connections can be made across reading and writing interactions through teaching and learning. Students in dual-language programs can benefit from the reciprocity of reading and writing activities. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with practical ideas for planning teaching interactions that foster reciprocal gains in literacy.

Biliteracy

The complexity of the reading and writing process necessitates that dual language teachers be well grounded in theoretical frameworks of language, as well as best instructional strategies to optimize the biliteracy skills students need (Edelsky, 1982, 1986; Serna, 2009; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000). The teaching decisions the teacher

makes on biliteracy issues should be done effectively and efficiently (Lindholm-Leary, 2005). Today, teachers are tasked with many different instructional activities that occur every day, as well as with individual school initiatives. These time demands on educators make it difficult to manage and differentiate instruction for students. Therefore, teachers need to be able to make efficient use of their time to optimize learning outcomes. By learning to observe and analyze the reading and writing behaviors of students, teachers can make significant and valuable decisions to guide their instruction (Hernandez, 2001).

Reciprocity

Students in dual language programs of instruction can greatly benefit from the powerful effects of the reciprocity of reading and writing. Bilingual students need to make accelerated biliteracy progress, and teachers can use careful observation and analysis of students' writing samples and reading behaviors to make explicit instructional decisions that can accelerate the students' literacy skills (Moll, 2001; Reyes, 2008). Connections can be made across reading and writing because each reading or writing act has the potential for providing a relevant context for learning about the other, and in this way, they influence each other (Clay, 1998).

Strategic processing in reading and writing

The cognitive strategies used in both literacy activities are identical (DeFord, 1994). When reading and writing, students search for information, select responses, monitor, confirm or reject, and self-correct their responses. Readers

and writers focus on the messages they are trying to construct while performing these strategic activities. At the same time, they are also using and integrating several categories of knowledge: pragmatic knowledge dealing with the purpose of writing and reading, semantic knowledge dealing with the meaning of the words, syntactic knowledge dealing with the structure of the language, and graphophonic knowledge dealing with letters and words (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000).

When teachers analyze students' literacy behaviors, they have an idea of how the students' thinking and processing of information are occurring. When teachers have accurate information regarding what students are doing when processing texts, they can plan teaching interactions that allow students to explicitly make important connections between reading and writing.

Clay (2005) believes that a student's writing knowledge serves as a resource to help the student-as-reader. This reciprocal behavior, however, may not occur spontaneously. Teachers can explicitly support these connections by directing students to use what they already know from reading when reading and writing (Clay, 2005). Teachers can have a powerful impact on students making meaningful connections that can support both reading and writing.

The intervention the teacher chooses to use during instructional interactions is also very important. Prompts or calls for action used in writing should parallel prompts used in reading. Anderson and Briggs (2011) offer specific language suggestions to use during small-group or individual instruction. For example, to encourage strategic monitoring behaviors during guided reading, a teacher might say, "Try

that again and make sure it looks right." During a shared writing lesson, a teacher might say, "Run your finger underneath the word. Say it slowly. Does it look right?" (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 548). When the teacher's language is clear and consistent, the students can easily see connections between reading and writing.

The relationship between reading and writing can be explained as "symbiotic; that is, they mutually reinforce, enhance, and shape each other" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 189). Reading different kinds of books helps writers become familiar with a variety of genres, language structures, and styles they can use in writing (Lindsey, 1996). Writing helps readers think about ways in which they interact with text to communicate meaning. It also helps them in using the processing strategies necessary for both reading and writing in an efficient way.

In writing, students have to slow down and think about the ways they are going to express their ideas. They need to think about what they are going to say, which language structures they are going to use, and decide how they are going to organize the message. Finally, they need to use their knowledge about the alphabetic principle, spelling patterns, orthography, and the conventions of print to write the letters and words they need to communicate their messages. "Writing can contribute to building almost every kind of inner control of literacy learning that is needed by the successful reader . . ." (Clay, 2001, p. 12).

In reading, students are using what they know about the world, about language structure, and about the conventions of print to interact with the text and decipher the message intended by the author. If teachers analyze the writing sample

of a first grader and observe that the student is making commas and periods at the end of each sentence with great emphasis, this behavior probably indicates that the student is paying a lot of attention to punctuation. Teachers can use this information to emphasize the use of punctuation in reading to help the student use this knowledge of punctuation to improve reading fluency. For example, teachers can demonstrate how in reading we use punctuation to parse or group words together and add intonation in order to read statements that sound natural and are meaningful.

The activities described below are suggested as examples of the many ways in which teachers can explicitly make connections between reading and writing. In dual language settings, these activities can be conducted in the native language as well as in the second language to support the connections between both languages and to foster the transfer of knowledge and skills within a common underlying linguistic proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

Ideas to connect reading and writing in the classroom

1. Analyzing student writing samples

Select one or more student writing pieces. Observe and analyze the patterns evident in each sample of student writing. Consider:

- What are this child's strengths? How can these strengths be used to make precise decisions about an instructional strategy or approach?
- What are this child's challenges? How can the student's strengths be used to make decisions about an instructional strategy or approach that can be helpful in or overcoming those challenges?

Teachers should plan their teaching interactions with the students' strengths in mind as they consider how to move students from known or partially known information to the unknown information that the teacher wants them to learn. Teachers can then find ways to facilitate the process at the student's current level.

For example, when working with an emergent reader/writer who is still learning about letters, teachers can carefully analyze the letter forms made in the student writing sample. Does the student show a preference for letters that have curvy lines, like *s*, *c*, *u*, and *o*, or does the student prefer letters with angular lines, like *k*, *w*, and *y*? Are the letters the student chooses to write selected randomly? Are the letters from the student's own name? Do they represent the letter features that are piquing the child's interest? If a student is noticing angular lines in reading, then the student will attempt to write letters or letter representations with angular lines. The teacher's decision might then be to conclude that it would be easier to teach the letter *y* than it would be to teach the letter *o* because of the attention being given to the angular letter forms. This type of analysis is particularly important for teachers of struggling readers and writers who may have a limited knowledge of letters and words.

2. Connecting reading and writing during a read-aloud

A visualization activity can be used to create a simple story map with three spaces to write about the beginning, middle, and end of a story. The teacher chooses a story that lends itself to detailed, colorful visualizations and opportunities to discuss background information, and then introduces the story to the students. The teacher will not show

the story's illustrations; instead the teacher will ask the students to visualize the setting and characters. Students can fold an 8½ x 11 inch sheet of paper into three sections, similar to the folds needed to place a letter in an envelope. The teacher will proceed to read the beginning of the story, and then will stop and ask students to summarize and write down what happened at the beginning of the story in just one sentence. The students will also quickly sketch what happened in the story. A simple drawing will be adequate. The teacher will then read the middle of the story and ask students to write down and illustrate what happened in the middle. The same procedure will be followed for the end of the story.

Students who completed this activity in a Texas school district drew detailed and colorful sketches about a story that included clowns and ballerinas searching for a magician's rabbit. The rabbit was hiding inside the magician's long sleeve. As observant researchers, it was interesting to see the way each student visualized the events of the story. Their short summaries even included information they inferred from the teacher's reading of the selection (Torres Elías & Robles-Goodwin, 2010).

3. Connecting reading and writing during a shared reading

By using sticky notes, teachers can help students make predictions, inferences, or summaries of what has happened in a story. For this activity, the teacher distributes sticky notes and a copy of the reading selection to each student. The teacher decides what to emphasize and conducts a shared reading of the story, pausing every once in a while to ask

students to quickly write down their predictions, inferences, or summaries. Students post their notes on the pages of their books and, at the end of the story, discuss their comments. It is helpful to plan in advance the places where the teacher is going to stop to ask questions.

4. Making words and writing stories

This simple and fun activity can be used to help students think about how individual letters are used for words and how words relate to reading and writing. This activity is based on the work of Cunningham (2005). It is an effective activity to use during content area instruction to highlight academic vocabulary. Teachers will select a reading that is either a fiction or non-fiction selection. Next, they will think about a word related to a reading and inform the students that there will be a mystery word. Students work in pairs, and teachers provide students with index cards or blank sheets of paper. Students fold the index cards or the paper in half horizontally. Then, they fold them again, forming squares. Finally, they tear the cards or paper into squares, and write a letter given by the teacher on each square. There might be some squares that will be left blank, depending on the number of letters in the word selected as the secret word. From the scrambled letters the students will try to make the unknown word, using all the letters.

For example, after reading a selection about magnets in English, the students will be directed to write the letters *g, m, n, t, s, a,* and *e* on the squares. The secret word they will discover at the end of the process is *magnets*. After reading a selection about Chinese lamps in Spanish, students will be

directed to write the letters *r*, *m*, *p*, *l*, *s*, *a*, *a*, and *á* on the squares. The secret word they will discover at the end of the process is *lámparas* (lamps).

For this example, the secret word in English has seven letters. To facilitate the activity the teacher will ask each pair of students to make and write down all the words that can be made with the seven letters beginning with one letter, then two letters, and so on until they discover the secret word. Students can move the letter squares and make the following words: using one letter (*a*), then two (*at, an*), three (*sat, tan, met,* and so on), four (*ants, game, gets,* and so on), five (*games, names, meats,* and so on), six (*magnet*), until they discover the magic word they can make using all seven letters (*magnets*). Finally, the teachers can ask students to write stories using as many of the words they came up during this activity.

Conclusion

Teachers can make their teaching more effective and student learning more efficient by taking advantage of the power of the reciprocity of reading and writing. This power can yield extraordinary benefits for the bilingual student, especially since they need to be able to operate effectively in two literacy worlds, that of their dominant language and their second language. "Teaching reading and writing as reciprocal processes is a powerful tool for supporting struggling learners" (Anderson & Briggs, p. 546). The reciprocity of reading and writing can also allow smooth transitions between one language and the other and can enhance other areas of reading, such as comprehension and fluency. Bilingual students can be taught to use the reciprocal

effects of reading and writing to advance their biliteracy capabilities in an proficient and consequential way.

In this article, a variety of activities and recommendations was discussed to make the reading and writing connection, such as (a) analyzing student writing samples to make strategic teaching decisions on instruction, (b) connecting reading and writing during a read-aloud by mapping a story to visualize the different parts of a story, (c) connecting reading and writing during a shared reading to make predictions, inferences, or summaries of a story, and (d) making words and writing stories to help students think about how individual letters are used for words and their relationship to reading and writing. This activity is also recommended for enhancing vocabulary skills.

In addition, this article emphasized the importance of teachers becoming more observant of their students' behaviors during reading and writing in order better understand how students are processing information. These observations can help teachers not only to differentiate their teaching but also to effectively optimize their teaching time. Attention to the literacy details supports the value of teaching to the students' strengths and potential rather than fixating on their deficiencies. Teaching decisions are made with clear goals, and time is used effectively and purposely to scaffold the biliteracy process of students. Understanding the undeniable reciprocal nature of reading and writing can help teachers accelerate the biliteracy skills of students by undergirding their efforts when working with students from diverse backgrounds and language proficiencies. The overwhelming feelings of where to begin now have a starting point.

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