Increasing English Language Learner's Skills Through The Use Of Technology

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A growing number of students in the mainstream classroom are English Language Learners. Increasing awareness regarding the lack of progress and school achievement for these students has prompted government officials and special interest groups to promote legislation to change the ways in which these students are taught. In California, English Language Learners and their educators have been affected by two governmental acts: the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and California Proposition 227 passed by the state in 1998. Both pieces of legislation have critical implications for the teaching of English Language Learners in the state of California. In my English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom course, my project is a thematic unit incorporating second grade social studies and language arts standards, technology, and authentic assessments to meet the varied needs of the students in my classroom. This literature review will look at the implications of legislation on the education of English Language Learners in the state of California and the impact technology can have on both increasing student achievement and meeting the goals and requirements of both regulations.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 calls for the equivalent language development and academic achievement for both the English Language Learner and the English proficient student. This Act also holds accountable for the annual advances of the English Language Learner in English proficiency. Schools are charged with providing high quality instruction, challenging academic standards, and assessments in English for all students served by the school. Students are expected to be proficient in English within three years. A school's success and failure will

be determined by the outcomes of these assessments; if a school is found lacking it could lead to the loss of federal funding and/or serious reprimands (Bush, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also addresses the integration of technology into the education curriculum. The portion of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 entitled the Enhancing Education through Technology Initiative has three major goals: to create a technology literate student by eighth grade, to improve student achievement through the integration of technology into the curriculum, and to ensure teachers are prepared to integrate technology by providing professional development and additional technology resources. (Bush, 2001).

Proposition 227 (California, 1998) reinstates English-only instruction in California for all students, "as rapidly and effectively as possible". Students can participate in short-term bilingual instruction, not longer than one school year, before entering the English immersion programs. Long-term bilingual programs are no longer legal within this proposition. Educators in California must meet the requirements of both Proposition 227 and No Child Left Behind -- creating and meeting challenging academic standards and assessments within an English-only program. However, the population of the schools in California does not lend itself to an easy or quick immersion into English-only instruction. Forty-one percent of the English Language Learners in the United States live in the state of California, making up twenty-five percent of the state's school population. The largest concentration of English Language Learners in California is in Los Angeles county and comprises fully fifty-one percent of the county's student population (Tafoya, 2002).

The goal of both regulations is to have all students "proficient in English". To determine the appropriate ways in which to instruct the English Language Learner, a definition of

proficiency must first be constructed. Some determine proficiency as conversational English mastery, while others determine proficiency as the ability to read, comprehend, write, and speak the English language. Consensus on the definition is either difficult or impossible to achieve. Research shows that conversational proficiency can be achieved within a year's span, while reading and writing in English can take five years or more (Ma, 2002). If this research is correct, then most of California's English Language Learners will be in the mainstream classroom with little or no English proficiency. The question must not be what is proficiency, but how can we develop programs that meet the mandated goals of student achievement, while working in the mainstream classroom with the English Language Learner and their unique needs. The National Research Council Institute of Medicine purports that an effective program to support the English Language Learner would be:

a supportive school-wide climate, school leadership, a learning environment tailored to local goals and resources, articulation and coordination between schools, some use of native language and culture in the instruction of English Language learners, a balanced curriculum that incorporates both basic and higher-order skills, explicit skills instruction, opportunities for student-directed activities, use of instructional strategies that enhance understanding, opportunities for practice, systematic student assessment, staff development, and home and parent involvement. (August & Hakuta, p.72)

In California, the English Language Learners are now in the mainstream classroom with fewer skills and less preparation for learning. Teachers must be prepared to use research-based instruction for these students. Fortunately, many of these instructional methods are familiar to

the mainstream classroom teacher. Judith Lessow-Hurley (2002), suggests the following

strategies for the teachers of English Language Learners:

- Engage cooperative groups of English language learners and English speakers in common tasks.
- Develop content around a theme.
- Allow students nonverbal ways to demonstrate knowledge and comprehension.
- Use routine to reinforce language.
- Use visual aids and hands on activities to deliver content. (Lessow-Hurley, 2002, p.7)

One of the most effective methods to instruct the English Language Learner is cooperative

grouping. Rojas (2003) suggests the combination of differentiated assessment and cooperative

learning is the key to a successful program. Students need to read and work together in order to

learn the value of the spoken language. Assessments can be designed to judge the student's

mastery of the lesson and these assessments should be more than a pencil and paper test, moving

toward authentic assessment of the student's progress (Rojas, 2003). In a northern California

school, the integration of ELL students in to multi-age classrooms had proven beneficial.

Students are thematically taught using cooperative grouping, while teachers provide a content-

rich environment that incorporates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities.

Teachers are provided with professional development to increase their ability to work with a

diverse student population and parents are afforded the opportunity to participate in the program

and to increase their knowledge of the English language (Gebhard, 2002). Other ways to involve

the English Language Learner in the class are to use Total Physical Response (TPR) activities,

cooperative grouping, jigsaw activities, language experience, dialogue journals, and games

(Derrick-Mescula, et al,1998). By looking at the suggested methods and activities to engage the

English language Learner, one can see that integrating technology into the multi-lingual classroom has many benefits.

Technology integration provides the teacher with the opportunity to develop cooperative learning activities, create integrated learning, improve problem-solving skills, and encourage global learning. By using technology, students can work in groups outside the classroom and can connect to learners around the state or around the world to share research and data on myriad topics (Whitehead, 2000). Through their research, Apple Computer Corporation has found the use of technology in education has positive effects on student motivation and achievement. Increases in student -to- student collaborative interaction, teacher - to- student interaction, and student attendance are all found in classrooms that use technology effectively (National School Boards Association, 1995). English Language Learners directly benefit from the integration of technology in many ways:

- teachers become the facilitator of learning
- students can progress through an activity at their own pace
- decreased possibility for embarrassment due to a more individualized learning environment
- students are connected to the world in ways not always possible in the home environment
- the Internet can be fun as well as educational, providing learning through perceived play (Connected University, 2003)

There are many technology integration possibilities for the classroom teacher. Companies like Davidson and The Learning Company have translated their popular Math Blaster, Reading Blaster, and Reader Rabbit series of programs into Spanish. Microsoft has translated their Office Suite and other productivity software into a number of different languages as well. By using this type of software in the classroom, students will have the opportunity to work with both their native language and English in order to complete activities and

assignments. The California Learning Resource Network (http://clrn.org/home/) has developed

an extensive database of software, web resources, and video for the classroom teacher that

includes many multi-lingual entries. Programs like Inspiration, Kidspiration, and Kid Pix

provide a highly visual resource to assist the students in pre-writing, outlining, and

organizational activities (Brahan, 2003).

The use of the Internet for content area instruction provides another instructional method

for students and teachers. Web sites relating to most California content-standards can be found

on the Internet to assist teachers with the development of content-standard appropriate lessons.

The California State Department of Education has a link to all K-12 state standards. The

SCORE sites available at http://scorescience.humboldt.k12.ca.us/fast/teachers/frame.htm

(science), http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/SCORE/cla.html (language arts),

http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/ (social studies/history), and

http://score.kings.k12.ca.us/standards.matrix.html (math) provide direct links from the California

state content standards to lesson plans or activities for classroom use.

Virtual visits to museums, dinosaur dig sites, and field-trips allow the teacher to bring

things to the classroom that are otherwise unavailable due to distance or a lack of funding.

Students can observe a panda's movements (http://www.zooatlanta.org), explore the rainforest

(http://abcteach.com/RainforestFacts/Rainforestfacts.htm), and learn about Plymouth Rock at

(http://www.plimoth.org/); the possibilities are limitless. English Language Learners will be

able to use multiple learning modalities to learn the skills and objectives of the lessons (Haynes,

2002). The use of e-pals, collaborative projects, and "ask an expert" sites, are additional

possibilities for assisting the English Language Learner. Student projects can be set up that

allow the English Language Learner to work with students from their native or ancestral country on projects and research that benefits both schools. Teachers who take the time to set up hotlists and web quests also provide beneficial instruction to the English Language Learner. Hotlists give students a focus while completing online activities that enable them to concentrate on the task at hand. Web quests can take the place of a teacher-directed unit of study. By setting up a web quest, the teacher places the responsibility for learning in the hands of the student. Students are able to progress at their own pace, thus allowing for more flexibility and for different learning styles. The English Language Learner becomes more confident in their ability to contribute to the class while becoming more proficient in English (Connected University, 2003).

Communication with parents is an additional concern for teachers and a requirement of the legislation. Many parents are unable to come to school for conferences and activities. The teacher's web page or school's web site and e-mail communications will help to make these parents feel more involved in their child's education. While there are still many barriers to Internet access at home, several better priced offerings are available to families. Reasonably priced products like Web-TV, i-Opener, and Mailstation are giving more people the ability to receive e-mail. This gives educators the opportunity to provide information, schedules, and school calendars to parents rarely able to come to the school (Bishop, 2000).

Web sites for educators abound on the Internet. There are several sites with lesson plans, activities, and research for the English Language Learners and their teachers: Bigchalk, Classroom Connect, and Education World are three of the largest available. Sites for language translation are also available, many of which are either free or of at low cost to the educator: ALS International, CITAC Translator, and Translation Experts, Inc are three which currently

provide royalty-free translation (Bishop, 2000).

Two new entries into the field of education are the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) and the E-Book. Both products are readily available and offer interesting benefits to the students and teachers. Using a PDA, notes could be taken in the student's language of choice without a great need for expensive translation software or hardware. E-books hold approximately ten to twelve novels, and the availability of the same novel in multiple languages offers teachers the opportunity to teach a common theme within the bounds of a single classroom. PDA's now offer the option to download books and web materials as well(Bishop, 2000).

The English Language Learner and their teachers have many challenges ahead. Both the federal and state governments have imposed deadlines on the students to become English language proficient without providing the well constructed means to get them there. It is fortunate that many of the teaching techniques currently employed by mainstream teachers are excellent ways to instruct the English Language Learner within the bounds of the regular classroom. Technology provides many additional resources for the English Language Learners and their teachers. Through the integration of thematic units, Internet activities, communication skills, and patience, the English Language Learner will be able to succeed within the mainstream classroom. In order to successfully integrate the English Language Learner into the mainstream classroom, more research must be done to find and/or create a wealth of materials and resources for their teachers. Technology must play a large part in this development.

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