



Effective Literacy Instruction for Latino Students Receiving Special Education Services.

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A REVIEW OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH

In dealing with far-reaching policy initiatives regarding Latino students with disabilities in Mexico or the United States, it is easy to become focused on macro contexts of education, and with good reason. Macro contexts associated with education, such as regulatory agencies, help ensure that due process rights of students with disabilities are acknowledged and available to them and their families. Without the legislative, litigious, and broad social mandates as a base for educational equity for students with disabilities, we could not effectively proceed with our efforts toward widespread reform of special education services for Latino students.

However, what sometimes gets lost in discussions of due process rights and systemic educational reform is precisely what leads many of us to continue our work with Latino students with disabilities: the quality of educational services provided to them and their families on a daily basis. Those of us who spend time in classrooms with teachers and students occasionally see reason for hope, but most often we see reason to criticize: Spanish-speaking students in special education receive instruction that does not take into account their linguistic needs, that is linked to minimal academic growth, and that is the epitome of "dead end" classes (Figueroa 1986; Figueroa, this volume; Rueda, Cardoza, Mercer, and Carpenter 1984).

Consequently, we need constantly to remind ourselves that while the admirable and crucial work in the macro contexts of special education for Latino students in the United States and Mexico must continue, there are millions of Spanish-speaking students who show up daily to a teacher and a classroom. Furthermore, it is on that teacher and classroom that families of Latino students pin their hopes for their children's academic success.

This chapter, then, concentrates on the micro context of special education for Latino students--the classroom. Specifically, it synthesizes a body of research on Latino students in U.S. special education classrooms and relates that research to recent pedagogical directions in Mexico. From this synthesis of the research, principles of effective literacy instruction for Spanish-speaking students in the United States and Mexico emerge. These principles can in turn guide us in constructing those daily classroom contexts that promote acquisition of literacy skills among students with disabilities.

Classroom Research with U.S. Latino Students Receiving Special Education Services

Within the last ten years a number of studies looking closely at Spanish-English bilingual students in special education classrooms have appeared in the professional literature. In an earlier article I briefly described those studies and pointed out the striking communality of themes across them, despite their disparate locations and researchers (Ruiz 1995b). Since then, two other studies have taken place. Once again, in locations as different as Chicago and East Los Angeles, and with research teams who proceeded independently of each other, the results of these studies further validate earlier findings.

To become part of this review, studies had to meet the following criteria: (1) students had official designation as students with language learning disabilities; (2) the majority of focal students were Latino; (3) students were directly observed in the course of classroom interaction; and (4) the study explored covariant relationships between students' communicative and academic performance, and contextual features of classroom events. Eleven studies met the criteria.

Table 1 combines the data from these studies of U.S. Latino students in special education classrooms in a way that highlights their research themes and outcomes. In this chapter I describe in depth the two more recent studies as a way of illustrating the themes running through this corpus of studies. (For an in-depth description of the earlier studies, readers are referred to Ruiz 1995b.)

Lopez-Reyna (1996)

Lopez-Reyna (1996) and her research team began by studying at a special day classroom for Latino students aged seven to ten in a large urban school district in the Midwest. After extended observations, the researchers found that there was a skills-driven orientation, sometimes referred to as reductionism (Poplin 1987a), pervading the classroom. Briefly, reductionist instruction is based on the belief that reducing learning to small, discrete segments helps students acquire competency in the target area. Reductionist instruction is very appropriate for learning certain skills, and all teachers, even self-identified "holistic" teachers, employ reductionist instructional techniques for particular aspects of their curriculum. On the other hand, many literacy scholars have questioned exclusive reliance on reductionism for such complex, social, and strategic processes such as learning to read and write. Practice and drill in the subskills of literacy do not seem to add up to competence in an range of literacy practices (Flurkey 1997; Poplin 1987b; Taylor 1998). This is particularly true for second language learners (Tharp 1997; Krashen 1996). The dismal record of reading and writing achievement of U.S. students with language learning disabilities makes a strong case for rethinking reductionist, traditional, special education instruction associated with this underachievement (Figueroa, this volume; Skrtic 1998, 1991).

The reductionist orientation in the classroom studied by Lopez-Reyna was operationalized through the primary literacy activities of the students: copying words and stories from the board and reading isolated words from lists. Under these conditions, students showed little growth in acquisition of oral language and literacy skills, and reduced engagement with academic tasks. However, when the research team helped change the reductionist orientation of the classroom through introduction of very different instructional strategies, there was marked growth in the students' language and literacy skills.

One of the research team's interventions consisted of purposely focusing on connections between literacy lessons and the students' background knowledge through a well-documented method of effective reading instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students called the Experience-

Text-Relationship method (Au 1979). The team also expanded the students' reading materials from worksheets to trade books. Furthermore, they allowed bilingual students to use their language of preference and to write extended text on self-selected topics.

Results of the intervention showed that students made great improvement in knowledge and use of reading strategies, analytical responses to literature, oral language initiations and questions, and overall engagement.

Table 1 represents the Lopez-Reyna study in the following way. First, the study focused on three aspects of literacy skills: oral language use, reading and writing, and a broader dimension of learning--engagement. A quick perusal down table 1 shows that the other, earlier studies of bilingual special education classrooms have also looked at these four dimensions of literacy and learning as outcomes. The Lopez-Reyna study further examined the classroom orientation and how beliefs about instruction were related to the daily activities of the students. Other studies, such as Ruiz et al. (1995), have also looked at the connection between teacher beliefs and classroom practices, as indicated in the table under the more generic category of orientation. Finally, the Lopez-Reyna study determined a co-variant relationship between the outcomes (increased language and literacy skills) and the features of the instructional context (inclusion of students' background knowledge in literacy lessons, use of the students' native language, meaning-based literacy instruction, and promotion of increased interaction among students). These situational features of the classroom's social organization are indicated on the right half of table 1.

Gutierrez and Stone (1997)

The other recent study of bilingual, special education students' classroom interaction was undertaken by Gutierrez and Stone (1997) in the Los Angeles area. These researchers closely examined the classroom interactional patterns of a fifth-grade Latino boy, Billy, in an inclusion setting, the only study in table 1 to target such a placement option. Billy was experiencing his first general education inclusion classroom after a series of special day class placements.

The general education classroom was unique in that it had a community of learners orientation based on cultural historical theory (Rogoff, Radziszewska, and Masiello 1995). Briefly, in a community of learners classroom less experienced students (here, less experienced in terms of academic uses of language and literacy) participate in "apprenticeship experiences" with others who have greater proficiency. In contrast to traditional, teacher-active/student-passive instructional patterns, responsibility for teaching and learning is shared among students and teachers. This shared responsibility multiplies opportunities for students to move on to complex skills; rather than depending solely on the teachers, students can also rely on more expert peers to provide additional bridging experiences (guided participation) to academic competence. Operating within this theoretical framework, Gutierrez and Stone point out the danger of isolating low-performing students with each other (traditional special day classrooms), or of traditionally organized, general education, inclusion settings that inhibit student-active forms of participation.

Gutierrez and Stone tracked Billy's participation in Book Club, an instructional approach to reading that mirrors book clubs of avid adult readers. In book clubs, also known as literature study circles, students meet in small groups to discuss, analyze, and in other ways respond to literature (Ruiz, Garcia, and Figueroa 1996; Samway and Whang 1995). Using videotapes, field notes, interviews, and an analysis of student work products, Gutierrez and Stone found that over the academic year

Billy progressed from participating with gestures only in book discussions, to making fledgling linguistic contributions, to tentative participation, to actually taking the lead in his group's interpretation of the meaning of a literature book. The researchers documented that in a nontraditionally organized, general education classroom, this first-time, fully included Latino student with learning disabilities became what they term an "emergent expert." They attribute his growing academic competence to participation in a social organization that "minimized differences in that it used each member's resources" (29). Table 1 reflects this study's focus, outcomes, and co-varying features of instruction that resulted in Billy's increased oral discourse competence.

These two recent studies differ on the surface. For example, the Gutierrez and Stone research is a case study located within a larger ethnographic classroom study, while the Lopez-Reyna work can be characterized as a classroom intervention study, comparing differing methods of literacy instruction. Furthermore, Gutierrez and Stone focused primarily on oral discourse development, while Lopez-Reyna looked at a range of oral, reading, and writing skills. However, both studies support a recurrent, working theory that I have pointed out in an earlier analysis of bilingual special education classroom studies. This theory holds that certain contextual features of instruction--features which radically differ from traditional special education approaches (again, with an almost exclusive reliance on English, reductionism, skill drills, and relative student passivity)--result in marked, positive language and literacy gains for Spanish-speaking students receiving special education services for language and learning difficulties. Consequently, a close look at the commonalties running through the studies listed in table 1 can be generalized to form a set of working principles for the effective instruction of Spanish-speaking students identified as having language learning disabilities.

Working Principles for Effective Literacy Instruction for Spanish-Speaking Student with Language Learning Disabilities

To the extent possible, I have collected from major special education and bilingual education journals all of the currently available studies of classroom interaction among Spanish-English bilingual students with language learning disabilities. [1] I also located research articles in edited books on bilingual and bilingual special education. In addition, I included widely cited, unpublished manuscripts meeting the previously delineated criteria. As noted earlier, there is remarkable convergence among these studies as to contextual features of instruction that promote increased language and literacy skills in this target population.

It is important to note, however, that the results of this body of studies are further validated by work proceeding from the most prestigious center for research in second language and literacy acquisition, the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE, University of California, Santa Cruz). CREDE, too, has conducted a meta-analysis of classroom studies, specifically looking closely at twenty years of research on effective instruction for students who speak English as a second language. Through this extensive meta-analysis, CREDE has developed a list of five principles for effective instruction--principles that are strikingly similar to those emerging from this review of bilingual special education studies. As I list the working principles from bilingual special education research, I also note the principles from second language research as put forth from CREDE (Tharp 1997).

Principle I: Connect Students Background Knowledge and Personal Experiences With Literacy Lessons

The teachers in the Lopez-Reyna study operationalized this principle by preceding reading with questions and conversation that linked or built up students' background knowledge with the book's key themes or information. After reading, students critically analyzed literary elements of the stories, e.g., they compared the story elements with earlier connections to their own lives. The teachers also encouraged students to write extended texts that brought their life experiences into the curriculum.

In the Gutierrez-Stone study the teacher gave Billy and his classmates the opportunity to socially construct their understandings and interpretations of children's literature in book clubs. Once again, students were invited to connect the literacy curriculum with their own life experiences and personal knowledge.

This principle is reinforced by CREDE Principle III, as derived from their meta-analysis of second language and literacy research: Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community.

Principle II: Foster the Use of Students' Primary Language (L1) in Literacy Lessons

In the intervention phase of the Lopez-Reyna study, teachers increased opportunities for the students to use their primary language in classroom literacy activities. The teachers also brought in many children's books in Spanish to use as resources for more cognitively complex skill building and literary discussions.

In the Gutierrez and Stone study, Billy and his classmates chose to use English in the particular book discussions reported in the article. However, as in the classroom from the Lopez-Reyna story, students could exercise a choice of language during literacy events. Consequently, students' oral discourse skills in both studies showed surprising growth. [2]

Principle III: Create Opportunities for Students to Meaningfully and Authentically Apply Their Developing Oral Language and Literacy Skills

Rather than requiring students to complete worksheets that only dealt with subskills of literacy, the teachers in the intervention phase of the Lopez-Reyna study took a very different approach. They asked students to use oral and written language that accomplished a range of communicative purposes. As in the Gutierrez and Stone study, students' oral language contributions also increased in both number and quality when there was an authentic reason to communicate.

One part of this principle deserves special mention: literacy skills. Teachers applying this principle to their classrooms take very seriously the charge to teach literacy skills and subskills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling and punctuation, grammar, reading comprehension strategies, and so on. However, they acknowledge the last twenty years of research in second and foreign language education that unequivocally establishes the link between meaning-driven, communicative instruction and second language and literacy development.

CREDE Principle I: Develop Competence in Language and Literacy Instruction Throughout All Instructional Activities

The narrative accompanying the principle elaborates: "Language/literacy development should be

fostered through use and through purposive conversation between teacher and students, rather than through drills and decontextualized rules" (p. 13).

Principle IV: Foster Increased Levels of Interaction (Oral Language, Reading, and Writing) among Students and Teachers

The teachers in both classrooms discussed in this article enacted this principle by increasing the opportunities and authentic reasons for students to collaborate on literacy and other academic tasks. Through these collaborations students dramatically increased their productive and receptive oral language interactions as well as their opportunities to read and write for a range of purposes.

CREDE Principle II: Facilitate Learning through Joint Productive Activity among Teacher and Students; and

Principle V: Engage Students through Dialogue, Especially Instructional Conversation

At least two nationally recognized literacy programs for Spanish-speaking students with language learning disabilities have based their instructional strategies on these principles: the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Project based at California State University Sacramento (Ruiz, Garcia, and Figueroa 1996) and AIM for the Best based at the University of Texas at Austin (Ortiz and Wilkinson 1992).

The appendix of this article shows an example of how the OLE Project has incorporated these principles through the selection of key instructional strategies. The appendix contains an excerpt from the OLE Curriculum Guide that describes interactive journals, an instructional strategy that clearly enacts the four principles of effective instruction. When writing in their interactive journals, students take pen in hand to communicate with either teachers or peers on the topic of their choice, and receive written responses to their journal entries. Hence, students are able to bring their life experiences to the literacy event (Principle I): to use the language of their choice (Principle II); to exchange messages with real communicative intent with a real audience (Principle III); and to be the most active agents in the literacy event, initiating extended turns of writing and talk (Principle IV).

Connections to Recent Literacy Instruction Trends in Mexico

The most heartening aspect of these principles and practices for effective literacy instruction is their strong connection to recent pedagogical reform in literacy education in Mexico. Largely based on the work of Latin American scholars such as Emilia Ferreiro and Margarita Gomez Palacio, Mexican educators in both general and special education have applied similar principles and their associated instructional techniques with deaf students (Ruiz and Obregon 1999), students with mild to severe language disabilities (Garcia 1997; Obregon 1998; Valencia 1998), students at risk of failing the first grade (Gomez Palacio, Antinori, Lus, Maldonado and Uribe 1984), and primary literacy education in general (Gomez Palacio, Villareal, Gonzales, Araiza, and Jarillo 1995). The result is a convergence of theory and practice from both sides of the border about what constitutes effective literacy instruction for Spanish-speaking students who are struggling to learn to read and write.

Conclusion

This chapter has begun to map out principles of effective literacy instruction based on classroom research with Spanish-speaking students receiving special education services. A number of educational researchers, myself included, would expand this list of principles based on their own and others' work. However, I have striven here to keep to those principles which have the most extensive theoretical and empirical base, as exemplified in the studies listed in table 1.

Our task, however, as Mexican and U.S. educators is unfinished and ongoing. We need to continue our joint research and programmatic efforts to optimize literacy instruction for students struggling with Spanish and English literacy. We also must keep forefront in our minds what I highlighted in the beginning of this chapter:

There are millions of Spanish-speaking students who show up daily to a teacher and a classroom. And on that teacher and classroom, families of Latino students pin their students hopes for their children's academic success.

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Notes

(1.) Not included in this list is research that was primarily self-reporting in nature and in other ways not based on systematic and intense observation of classroom interaction. Though those studies make general contributions to our knowledge base of effective instruction for Spanish-speaking students with disabilities, they do not include the level of detail needed confidently to connect instructional innovations with increased language and literacy achievement.

(2.) CREDE's omission of this principle is surprising given the well-documented effectiveness of [L.sub.1] education (Cummins 1998; Greene 1998; Ramirez et al 1991; and Thomas and Collier 1996).

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Appendix

Excerpt from the OLE Curriculum Guide.

Instructional Strategies for Optimal Learning Environments

Interactive Journals

In Interactive Journals, students write about what is important to them. They share their life stories and their burning interests. In return, teachers are able to say to their students through their oral and written responses, "What goes on in your life is important to me." Interactive Journal writing also promotes the development of written conventions through written demonstration by teachers as they respond to student's entries. Furthermore, the emphasis on the message (and not the mechanics) encourages students to take more risks with their writing topics and skills. Interactive Journals in which students write and teachers respond on a daily basis create a developmental record of writing progress (Flores & Garcia, 1984).

Recommended Procedures:

1. The Interactive Journals procedure has at least three basic parts: (a) the student draws and writes; (b) a teacher/paraprofessional/parent volunteer or peer responds with a written question about the student's entry; and (c) the student answers the question either orally or in written form.
2. Before beginning this instructional strategy, it is helpful to demonstrate the three basic parts of the interaction. In a large format, such as an overhead transparency or chart, write the date, brainstorm a topic out loud, draw, and then vocalize the words as you write your entry. Then, if possible, ask another teacher or parent to write a written question to your entry. Finally, orally respond to the question.
3. Ask students to follow the same procedure that you have demonstrated. As they finish their entries, students bring them to the teacher for a response in the form of a question. Students in turn orally or in written form answer the teacher's question.

For emergent readers and writers: When students bring you a journal entry that you cannot read (i.e., it is scribbled or in letter string form), simply ask them to "read" it to you. As you respond with a written question, be sure to vocalize as you write so that the students can understand the question and respond to you.

For independent readers and writers: Experiment with buddy journals. Pair students up with a buddy (either randomly or by allowing students to suggest their top choices for a writing partner with you making the final decision), and ask them to write to each other. OLE teachers suggest, however, that teachers occasionally collect and respond to the journals to provide both a model of writing and to monitor students' progress.

Reminders:

- * Students, not teachers, choose topics for journal entries.
- * Students receive a response each time they write.
- * During journal time, teachers write in their own journals and ask a student to respond.

Assessment: Interactive Journal Matrices

Students' journals become an authentic record of their writing development. You may want to use a version of the portfolio matrices in figure 1. These have been used by OLE teachers to analyze and track their students' writing development. They should be accompanied by sample journal entries and placed in students' portfolios.

Which of the optimal conditions listed in table 1 does the Interactive Journals strategy help create in your classroom?

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