



## Effective Instruction for Language Minority Children with Mild Disabilities

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ERIC EC Digest #E499  
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ED333621 May 1991

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This digest describes the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Curriculum—a Resource for Teachers of Spanish Speaking Children developed to suggest ways of teaching language arts to such students and to suggest specific classroom activities that are compatible with the research on effective instruction. This bilingual special education class model looks for the upper range of the bilingual child's academic, linguistic, and social skills (Ruiz, 1988). The following principles govern the OLE curriculum:

### **Take Into Account the Students' Sociocultural Background and Its Effect on Oral Language, Reading and Writing, and Second Language Learning**

The following four areas have been identified as important to children from language minority groups: oral language uses, knowledge about print, background knowledge, and sense of story (Anderson & Gipe, 1983; Barnitz, 1986; Hudelson, 1984, 1987; Steffensen & Calken, 1982).

#### ***Oral Language Uses***

Some children arrive at school already familiar with the use of language in a decontextualized manner, that is, dissociated from shared experience and dependent on precise linguistic formulations (Cummins, 1981; Olson & Nickerson, 1978; Wells, 1981). For example, they may come from homes where books were introduced and discussed at an early age; their parents may have modeled, scaffolded, and elicited their narratives about real and fictional events. Children from families with few outside links, however, may not have sufficient experience with specific, precise, topic-centered language to function effectively in a typical language arts curriculum (Au & Jordon, 1981). Educators should not categorize these children as having language disabilities; rather, they should recognize that a sociocultural factor has influenced the children's verbal performance and has pinpointed the area that must be addressed by oral language instruction in the classroom.

#### ***Knowledge About Print***

Another area of sociocultural influence is the knowledge about print that children bring to school literacy tasks. Children begin learning to read and write before they start school and begin to learn letter-sound correspondences. Very early on, they may learn why Dad writes a list before he does the grocery shopping (functions of print); where Mama looks to start to read the storybook (book conventions); and how to read "McDonald's" or "K mart" from commercial signs (environmental print). Research has shown that knowledge in these and similar areas related to print is a precursor to conventional reading.

#### ***Background Knowledge***

A third aspect of literacy instruction that is directly influenced by sociocultural differences is background knowledge. Studies with second language learners show that when they read texts congruent with their background knowledge (for example, when Indian students read about a wedding in India rather than a wedding in the United States), they read it faster, recall both the gist and the details better, and summarize or retell it better (Barnitz, 1986; Steffensen, Joag-dev, & Anderson, 1979). Another study shows that second

language learners with limited English proficiency can do as well as more proficient students on reading comprehension tasks when they do prereading activities that activate and extend the background knowledge pertinent to the tasks.

### **Sense of Story**

The final sociocultural influence on reading and writing involves the development of a sense of story or narrative schema, that is, an internal sense of the usual components of a story: setting, main character(s), problem, attempts to resolve the problem, character reactions to the attempts, and resolution (Stein & Nezworski, 1978). An optimal learning environment would have children reading (and listening to) a variety of well-formed stories.

### **Take Into Account the Students' Learning Handicaps and How They May Affect Oral Language, Reading, Writing, and Second Language, Learning**

In an OLE classroom, the teacher would not stop with involving the children in prereading activities to access and develop their background knowledge. The teacher would explain the importance of knowing as much as possible about a text before reading it; demonstrate a strategy such as the survey text method (Aukerman, 1972), which students can use to prepare themselves before they read a text; and provide opportunities for the students to practice the strategy.

### **Follow Developmental Processes in Literacy Acquisition**

The OLE Curriculum Guide calls for language arts instruction that acknowledges the importance of developmental phases of literacy acquisition in a number of ways. First, teachers should give students the time they need to develop their knowledge about reading and writing in highly interactive literacy events. Second, student errors in their reading and writing attempts should not automatically be viewed as "bad habits" (Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986). Instead, teachers should examine the errors for evidence of what children can do, as evidence of their progress through developmental phases. Finally, teachers should realize that a curriculum that does not provide the rich language and literacy environment described here is an impoverished curriculum that will promote impoverished learners.

### **Locate Curriculum in a Meaningful Context Where the Communicative Purpose is Clear and Authentic**

One important way to encourage "meaning making" among children is to engage them in reading and writing whole texts instead of text fragments removed from context (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987). The OLE Curriculum Guide recommends that, in reading lessons, students be encouraged to interact with whole books, poems, and other forms of written language as a way to facilitate meaning making. For writing, teachers should use the Writing Workshop approach described by Atwell (1987). Here, students have control over intentions, topic, and audience as they write and publish their own books. Classmates should meet frequently for peer conferences on their pieces, simultaneously stimulating their need to be clear and interesting writers and providing alternative oral language opportunities.

### **Connect Curriculum with the Students' Personal Experiences**

Many students show greater progress or increased investment when reading and writing tasks give them the opportunity to interject their personal experiences (Au & Jordan, 1981; Flores et al., 1986; Willig & Swedo, 1987). The OLE Curriculum Guide gives specific suggestions on how to connect students' personal topics to the language arts curriculum by using the Writing Workshop and the ETR method, for example.

### **Incorporate Children's Literature Into Reading, Writing, and ESL Lessons**

Using actual examples of literature can extend students' knowledge about print (including the more sophisticated aspects of this knowledge, such as text structure or style), increase areas of their background knowledge, and facilitate the construction of meaning through whole texts. Literature, even more than expository writing, is decontextualized; that is, its clues to meaning are more implicit than explicit. Second language learners working through literary works must negotiate the meaning, not only between themselves and the text, but also with others. These negotiating moves (e.g., checks for understanding, requests for clarification) have been linked to better English-language gains.

### **Involve Parents as Active Partners in the Instruction of Their Children**

The OLE Curriculum Guide details various ways to promote equitable parent-school partnerships. One is

Project TOT (Training of Trainers), in which parents from language minority groups who are knowledgeable about the inner workings of schools join with families who do not use the available special education services. The families participate in small-group seminars to acquire information and skills related to obtaining those services, as well as forming ongoing support groups.

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*This digest is based on "An Optimal Learning Environment for Rosemary," by Nadine T. Ruiz, which appeared in Exceptional Children, Vol. 56, No. 2 (October 1989).*

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