Literacy Needs of English Learners

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Over the course of the quarter I learned many useful items that I intend to use when I begin to teach. Many of these elements I would not have known if it weren’t for this class. The research and investigations that we have done throughout this quarter have really allowed me to immerse myself in the topic of language arts and literacy for students, specifically English learners. This discovery of new information is especially interesting to me because as a mathematics specialist there has not been not much talk or emphasis about language arts in my field. In fact, when I began this class I was worried about its relevance towards my education. Now, as the quarter is winding down, I realize that this class has been extremely valuable and without it, my experience as a math teacher could have been much more difficult than I would’ve imagined. I realize now, more than ever, the importance of language arts in math, and that time in this class has taught me valuable information about English language learners and language arts in my content area.

**How Many Students in California are English Learners?**

As we know, English language learners make up a large part of our students in California. This statistic is special to California because of our geographic disposition to having more English learners than the rest of the country. The national percentage of English learners in the United States of America is around 10%, whereas the percentage of English learners in California is around 21%. This 21% is about 1,346,333 students in public school systems. This statistic does not even include private schools, which allows us to infer that there are many more English learners in our school systems than recognized, not to mention the unidentified English learners. In order to fully grasp this number we need to put this statistic into perspective. The average class in America ranges from 25-30 students; let’s call it 28. This means that there are about six English learners per classroom in California, as opposed to the national average which is around three. In California we have twice as many English learners as the national average, which is why knowing the following useful strategies are so key. Teachers have a responsibility to all students, especially to English learners, because of the increase in English learners in America and the new emphasis on language arts in the classroom. As teachers in California our responsibility is much more complex because of the need to educate these English learners.

**How Do We Assess Language Proficiency?**

California’s assessment program is composed of many different testing systems and variations. There are many different types of assessments and placement tests within the system that tell teachers and students where the student places as far as their language proficiency is concerned. The two main assessments that stood out to me are the PLA and the CELDT. First the PLA or Primary Language Assessment is an assessment tool used as an initial assessment, meaning that the PLA is an assessment that tests how proficient the students are when they first are enrolled into a class, this test determines whether they are English learners or not. Proposition 227, which expedited English Learners into full English classroom plays a large role into this PLA testing system because it largely determines where the students taking the test are placed. The second test, the CELDT or California English Language Development Test is the one that appears most when referring to English learners. The CELDT is used to measure English learner’s development towards proficiency in English. The CELDT was designed to identify people with limited English, determine their level of English proficiency, and assess the English learners progress in listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. The CELDT is treated as the summative assessment of the program because it determines where the English learner is academically and determines whether the student is proficient enough to move out of the English Learner phase.

**Major Issues**

Obviously with any educational plan there are a multitude of issues that arise. The issue that I am choosing to focus on pertains to the area of assessment. Like many assessments these assessments are primarily test based, meaning the main way we are evaluating these students is through a variety of tests. The issue that arises is that many students aren’t able to translate their proficiencies and academic level onto the tests. Student’s tests do not accurately portray what they really know. This can be through a variety of reasons whether that be, a lack of competency for English, anxiety, a learning deficiency or lack of test taking skill. Regardless of why they can’t translate their skills onto a test, it is unfair to the students, because they are not being helped with their intrinsic disadvantage; alternate assessment should be made available to the students.

**Areas of Language and Literacy Needs**

 Ben Carson writes in his book, Gifted Hands, “If you can read, you can learn just about anything you want to know. The doors of the world are open to people who can read” (p.37). I believe that fostering our reading habits should be our one main goal when it comes to educating English learners. Simplifying the goals for our students would take a lot of stress off of them especially in the testing area of language acquisition. We simply need to make sure that all of our English learners are able to read. Obviously that doesn’t mean to stop there once we reach teach an English learner to read, but we need to focus on the simple areas of improvement that being, reading and then writing, then speaking and listening will develop afterwards. This sounds much easier than it is but we may be getting so caught up in standards, and language proficiency assessments that we are losing our main goal and veering off track.

**How Will I Address the Needs of English Learners?**

In order to fully address the needs of English Learners, I first need to entirely understand the needs that these students have. Five important needs for English learners are explained below

1. Increase Autonomy

A primary need for English learners is to be able to learn on their own. Many of these children aren’t able to teach themselves because of their language barrier. They develop learned helplessness and become dependent on their teachers. We need to not only teach students content but also teach them how to learn independently. To increase autonomy I will try to use some scaffolding techniques on my students. This will help with student autonomy by giving students valuable resources so they aren’t dependent on the teacher. Visual scaffolding supplies are especially useful for English learners.

1. Heterogeneous Classroom

English Learners also need to be in a heterogeneous classroom. This means that the classroom should be diverse and comfortable. This exposes the learners to different languages and experiences allowing them to develop more towards being a proficient English speaker. To promote a heterogonous classroom I will implement cooperative learning techniques to my classroom, eventually establishing mixed and comfortable base groups for the English Learners. Establishing roles within the groups and rotating the roles will encourage students to mix roles that way all students can have a turn at a different role. For example we want the English learner to present from time to time, when they are in a comfortable position to do so.

1. Compassionate and Patient Teaching

This may be an obvious need but it is definitely worth stating. English learners need to feel comfortable in their classroom. Teachers should make a concerted effort to make sure their classroom is safe and comfortable in order to increase learning, not only for English learners but also for all students. I do not think there is an exact science to being a compassionate and patient teacher but there are a number of strategies that can help. For instance, proper lesson planning and ample preparation will give you an outline of what needs to be done, keeping you on track. This will give you patience and keep you on task.

1. Extended Discussion

English learners need extended discussion in order to practice their new language skills. Students can practice new vocabulary, dialogue and social skills through discussion time with their fellow students. Obviously, this need goes hand in hind with the safe environment because students will not practice their newly acquired skills if they do not feel like they are in the right environment. There are many different strategies that can be implemented to increase discussion time in the classroom such as communication games, interactive read aloud and writing, modeled talk, and partner work.

1. Sensitivity to Cultures

English learners need teachers who are sensitive to their cultures. It is important for teachers to encourage students to learn both cultures. This means for the English learners to adapt to the new culture being presented and for the English-speaking students to be encouraged to learn about the other cultures in the classroom. This will encourage all students to learn about other cultures, expanding everyone’s knowledge and promoting a comfortable learning environment. Sensitivity to cultures can be implemented into curriculum through strategies like writing workshops and cultural studies.

**My Personal Feelings Towards ELD**

English language development is essential for Americans and specifically Californians. As Californians we are blessed with having a very diverse classroom, and with this diversity comes an opportunity to teach young minds of varying races, cultures and backgrounds. The consequences to our society of not teaching English language learners are immense. If we decide not to teach this group of children, then we are putting a disadvantage on at least 20% of our student population, which has a global effect. As stated before this 20% is over 1 million students who would be left without proper education. In order for America to improve in the academic ranks and to properly educate our population we need to educate our English learner population. The responsibility is on future educators to fully educate these individuals and lead them to become proficient English speakers.

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