Case Study: English Language Learners

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Los Angeles Unified School District has classified the second language learner as an English learner (EL).  This distinction simply means that the student grew up in a home that did not speak English as their primary language.  Students who have moved from a specific EL-support class to a general education class are titled reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP).  Fluent English proficiency (FEP) refers to those students who come from a home that does not speak English, and never needed the ESL class.  Both FEP and RFEP classified students take general education classes.

Daniel Webster Middle School offers different levels of support for these students.  There are four levels of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses--ESL 1, 2, 3 and 4, all taught using the Highpoint teaching program.  We have an EL Coordinator, a credentialed teacher who teaches ESL two periods a day and is the designated person who ensures our EL program is running correctly by updating and maintaining data in the student information system (SIS) and making sure our EL students get reclassified within the District required time frame.

As of Spring, 2009, 14 different languages were spoken on campus: Spanish, Punjabi, Arabic, Korean, Mandarin, Japanese, Armenian, French, Hindi, Serbo Croatian, Farsi, Indonesian, and Russian.  Of the 189 students enrolled, 49 were reclassified as fluent-English proficient last year.

This year, we host 143 students who are designated as EL.  Three of them scored proficient on the California State Test (CST), thirty-four scored basic, sixty scored below basic, and forty-six scored far below basic in English Language Arts (ELA).  Our EL students also take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), as required by the Education Code, Section 52164.1[a] (CDE, 2009).  Four students received a score of 5,  thirty-one students received an overall score of 4, sixty-four received a 3, twenty-seven received a 2, and twenty students received a 1 on the CELDT overall test.  In the reading portion, one student scored a 5, ten students scored a 4, fifty-two scored a 3, thirty-nine scored a 2, and forty-one scored a 1.  Very few students score in the upper ranges of these tests, with the majority falling under the bottom three categories of any given test.

The issue of reading comprehension needs to be addressed with our EL students. One solution to help these deficits is a silent sustained reading (SSR) program assisted by self-selected books, and a book conference with the teacher to check for understanding of the materials read.  Pleasure reading has been found to lead to EL students gaining fifteen months of reading growth in eight months, and can lead to the incidental acquisition of English vocabulary (Reiter, 2003).

The goals of self-selected reading are to introduce students to all types of literature, encourage reading interests, and build intrinsic motivation for reading (Cunningham 2003).  Other goals are to build fluency by repetition, and instill a love of reading.  Selecting proper reading materials is a separate skill-set for any reader, much less the EL student.  Some methods are reading the summary on the back cover, reading a paragraph from the middle of the book, genre study.  These skills  must be taught by the teacher at the very start of this program; if reluctant readers do not have methods for choosing pleasurable reading materials, they might balk at the assignment and not read anything at all.  Special care must be taken to ensure they have these skills, and measures must be taken to ensure they have a wide variety of high interest reading material at different reading level to choose from.  This is a perfect place for the teacher and teacher-librarian to collaborate; they can create a list of books to be be pulled for the class to choose from, with different themes and different books being pulled each time.

Time must be allotted for both self-selection and SSR.  An ideal place for SSR to occur is the school library, where both self-selection and quiet time to read can take place. This is particularly important, as even if students are motivated to read on their own outside of school, it is difficult for them to gain access to appropriate materials (Reiter 2003).  Class time should be set aside daily for SSR, and it is important that the teacher model their own reading habits during this time.

With lower level ESL classes, teachers alternate SSR with whole group readings and reading in cooperative learning groups.  These activities will assure that their language acquisition and reading comprehension is being supported.  Otherwise, teachers could pull students to read quietly to them in a private setting.  (Daniels, 2009)

Once students complete a book, they create 10 test questions using Bloom's Taxonomy keywords (taught in a previous lesson) and write their questions on a 4x6 card.  When this card is turned in, it is the signal to the teacher for a book conference with the student. These cards are collected and stored, so that when another student reads the same book, more questions can be added to the mix.  The teacher uses her own questions as well as the student's during the interview to check for understanding of the reading material.  Students choose one question from their own set to answer, which would give them buy-in for both creating questions and conferencing with the teacher.

Book conferences are an ideal way to check for understanding.  They are informal and personal, which builds relationships between student and teacher.  Students let the teacher know when they have completed a book and then the two sit down for an evaluative conference based on both teacher and student created questions.  The teacher asks the student questions and the student responds.  Grades are based from rubrics previously given to each student.

By reading, creating questions, and having conferences, many of literacy standard 4: pursuing personal and aesthetic growth are covered.  Students read for pleasure and personal growth, and are "participating in the social exchange of ideas" (AASL, 2009).  SSR with conferencing also reaches the California State Standards for 7th grade English Language Arts (ELA) of narrative, reading standard 3.2 (identifying events that advance the plot) and reading standard 3.3 (analyze character) (Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and School Support, 2009).  All these standards are the basis for an understanding of any storyline; a stronger understanding of them will help the EL student master the ability to read and create interest in pleasure reading.

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