

Getting Past “See Spot Run”

To increase equity for English-language learners, schools must provide the support that these students need to engage in challenging, content-based learning tasks.

Meg Gebhard

As a researcher of second-language learning in urban schools, I have come to anticipate certain inequities. For example, when I sign in at the main office and get directions to the English as a Second Language or bilingual class, I am no longer surprised when I find it in a far-off, makeshift room in the basement of the building or a portable classroom across the school's campus. Within the classroom, I have come to expect inadequate learning materials and little academic, content-based reading and writing.

Research suggests that my experiences are fairly typical. Many studies have documented the fact that English-language learners tend to spend their days segregated from more proficient users of English, without access to the kinds of classroom interactions that would help them attain an academic body of knowledge and develop a sense of themselves as valued, productive members of an increasingly multicultural, multilingual society (Gebhard, 2000, in press; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Asato, 2001; Little & Dorph, 1998; Olsen, 1994).

Why do so many schools provide such inequitable and inadequate instruction for their English-language learners, and what can we do about it? Insights from a study of a statewide school restructuring initiative in California that began in the 1990s can help us answer this question (Gebhard, 2000, in press;



Olsen, 1994). This initiative provided 144 schools across the state with \$105 million of additional funding to support a "bold" school restructuring proposal aimed at ensuring more equitable learning opportunities for the state's increasingly diverse student population (Little & Dorph, 1998, p. 1).

The three elementary schools in the following case studies all participated in the school restructuring initiative, but the schools used the funding to provide vastly different experiences for their English-language learners. These case studies indicate that schools often fail to provide powerful learning opportunities for English-language learners because of two common misconceptions about how academic literacy in a second language develops.

Silence Is Not Golden

In many schools in the study, teachers and administrators tended to discourage students from using talk, both in English and their home language, to figure out challenging print-based assignments. We observed this practice even when the schools had supposedly implemented such reforms as "cooperative learning" and "brain-compatible instruction."

At Web Magnet School,¹ which enrolled almost 30 percent English-language learners, a 3rd grade mainstream teacher named Mrs. Leavitt taught language arts and social studies during a 90-minute workshop block each morning (Gebhard, in press). During one class, Mrs. Leavitt instructed all students to complete a posted list of assignments individually and silently, as classical music played in the background and she conducted one-on-one writing conferences with selected students.

As directed, a student named Alma quickly got to work. First, she finished a short pen-pal letter, waited in line for a proofreading conference with Mrs. Leavitt, and recopied her draft to make needed corrections. Next, she opened her social studies textbook and began to

read about different kinds of land formations. After flipping through the pages for several minutes, however, she returned to her pen-pal letter and spent the remainder of the period intricately decorating the envelope with colored pencils.

On the basis of this snapshot, one might assume that Alma was an unmotivated learner. Such an assumption, however, would be dead wrong: Alma cooperated in class, enjoyed talking about what she learned in school, and was highly engaged when she knew what to do and how to do it. Like many of her classmates whose first language was not English, however, she had trouble making sense of content reading

Second-Language Literacy Development Is Not Linear

In addition to assuming that academic language abilities can develop in the absence of talk, many teachers and administrators in the study believed that engagement in challenging reading and writing tasks needed to wait until students mastered the basics of oral language.

Trent Elementary School in southern California provided its English-language learners with a transitional bilingual program and English as a Second Language instruction for an hour a day. All beginning English as a Second Language classes focused on developing oral language abilities by having

Research shows that the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in one's first and second languages are highly interrelated and interdependent.

assignments that contained unfamiliar vocabulary words and sentence structures not usually encountered in daily conversation.

Other students in Alma's group—both English-language learners and native English speakers—knew strategic ways of successfully completing the social studies assignment. But they were prevented from sharing this knowledge with her because the school had adopted a model of instruction that advocated silent, independent learning in the name of creating a "peaceful" learning environment. Consequently, Alma had no access to the kinds of social and linguistic interactions she needed to make sense of increasingly demanding reading and writing assignments. As the year progressed, despite attending a pull-out English as a Second Language class that focused on grammar rules, she fell further and further behind. She was retained in 3rd grade after being referred to the special education team for testing.

students play language games, sing songs, and complete relatively content-less assignments, such as worksheets related to various holidays and customs. The school used these methods regardless of the learners' ages or past education experiences.

This linear, building-blocks approach to second-language literacy development—however logical it may sound—unwittingly and unnecessarily delays English-language learners' opportunities to complete content-based, age-appropriate reading and writing tasks in English, especially if the school lacks a well-developed bilingual program that could enable students to cover academically challenging content in their first language.

At the time of this study, 80 percent of Trent's students spoke Spanish almost exclusively at home and in school. In describing their approach to academic literacy development in English, teachers and administrators asserted that they needed to "hold off"

content instruction in English until students achieved a high level of English proficiency. After students passed an exam measuring their English proficiency, teachers could begin introducing them to printed material in English, but only by returning to what teachers described as “cognitively less demanding” tasks—activities that a 3rd grade language arts teacher described as “not quite ‘See Spot run,’ but close.”

Consequently, many English-language learners in 3rd, 4th, and even 5th grade received little exposure to grade-level academic reading and writing tasks in English.

Sadly, teachers and coordinators in Trent’s English as a Second Language and bilingual programs had not explored much of the current research regarding biliteracy development, which might have led them to develop a different kind of program. This research shows that the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in one’s first and second languages are highly interrelated and interdependent (Faltis & Hudelson, 1998; Ferdman, Weber, & Ramírez, 1994; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000; Tharp, 1997). Further, it is both useless and ultimately impossible to separate discrete language processes in one’s teaching by presenting English-language learners with a step-by-step curriculum in which students first develop listening, then speaking, and finally reading and writing skills (Hornberger, 1994).

A Better Approach

Olive Grove Elementary School, located in an economically struggling region of rural northern California, implemented an innovative restructuring plan

designed to meet the needs of the school’s changing demographics. The school had experienced an influx of Hmong immigrants and, at the same time, an increase in the proportion of students from impoverished families.

Olive Grove’s restructuring plan called for integrating English-language learners into multiage classrooms taught by English as a Second Language and bilingual specialists (Gebhard, 2002).



These changes made it possible for one teacher, Mrs. Rathom, to include all students in an integrated science and language arts unit designed to introduce scientific ways of classifying animals and scientific report writing.

For this project, Mrs. Rathom divided the class into six heterogeneous groups by age, gender, and linguistic and academic ability. She gave each group a large poster board divided into three columns—labeled with the words *chordate*, *mollusk*, and *anthropoid*—and a set of laminated cards depicting various kinds of “critters” (beetles, rabbits, spiders, snakes, lobsters, clams, whales, and humans). She asked the groups to develop a method for organizing these

“critters” according to their physical characteristics and to report on their emerging hypotheses to the class. As students worked, they used the laminated cards, the poster board, written notes, and discussion among themselves, their teacher, and the bilingual aide, in English and Hmong, to develop ideas that they then presented and debated with their classmates in English.

During the next week, students built on this experience and their materials as they engaged in the process of writing “critter reports.” All students learned to connect everyday words and concepts (*head, body, bones, shell, hard, soft, inside, outside*) with more scientific ones (*endoskeleton, exoskeleton, vertebrates, invertebrates*) and to make scientific decisions about how animals are classified using such terms as *phylum, genus, and species*. The teacher and the bilingual aide, both of whom had a keen understanding of the project’s goals and of second-language development, guided students in this process. Working together, the teacher and aide supported English-language

learners in learning content-rich language and scientific concepts as well as the grammatical structure of English sentences—for example, word order and verb agreement in the sentence *A rabbit is a chordate because it has a backbone*.

More Than Just Good Teaching

Although this activity may seem like just good teaching, specific features make it particularly supportive of academic literacy development for English-language learners in less obvious ways. In making sense of this academic task, these English-language learners, regardless of their level of English proficiency, could

- Rely on the visual clues in a wide variety of classroom materials—laminated cards, poster boards, picture books, drawings, and Internet access—to help convey the meaning of the assignment.
- Seek clarification of oral and written directions and support for their developing ideas through interactions in their first and second languages with peers, teachers, and aides.
- Hear and try out new vocabulary words and sentence structures associated with content-based reading and writing in English.
- Record their emerging thoughts by taking notes that assisted them in making oral presentations and in completing future written assignments.
- Receive explicit feedback and instruction in the structure of English sentences, paragraphs, and longer texts from teachers who understood how both English and the students' native language worked.

In combination, these classroom practices provided a complex web of support that enabled English-language learners to engage in challenging, content-based tasks—an approach supported by the research (Dalton & Sison, 1995; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999; Tharp, 1997; Warren, Ballenger, Ogonowski, Rosebery, & Hudicourt, 2001).

Professional Development

Education leaders at Olive Grove looked for ways to support the professional development of both teachers who had experience working with English-language learners and Hmong community leaders who had a desire to enter the teaching profession. As a result, selected teachers and two bilingual aides were enrolled in an intensive, two-year credentialing program offered by a local state university and funded by the district. This long-term, intensive program met two nights a week and one full day a month during the academic year. Participating teachers noted that the program required a big commitment but that it had a huge impact on their beliefs and practices.

How did Olive Grove arrive at such a powerful approach to educating English as a Second Language and bilingual students? In part, the answer lies in the degree to which teachers and administrators paid close attention to local issues and worked hard to respond to these issues by using local resources in an informed, creative way. Many researchers point to the importance of analyzing local needs and resources, particularly in regard to supporting the professional development of all educators, including parents, teachers, and administrators (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Moll, 1990; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Stringfield, Datnow, Ross, & Snively, 1998).

Observations in these three schools

Why do so many schools provide such inequitable and inadequate instruction for their English-language learners, and what can we do about it?

The professional growth that Olive Grove educators experienced as a result of participating in this program stood in stark contrast to common practice. The two schools previously described were more typical in their almost complete lack of attention to the professional development of teachers who increasingly were called on to work with linguistically and culturally diverse learners. The districts in which these two schools were located offered what could best be described as tutorial sessions that helped teachers pass the state's pencil-and-paper licensure test but did not help them rethink what they actually did in their daily practice or how they might modify that practice to respond to local needs.

Responding to Local Issues and Student Needs

A question arises from a comparison of these three schools' restructuring expe-

riences: How did Olive Grove arrive at such a powerful approach to educating English as a Second Language and bilingual students? In part, the answer lies in the degree to which teachers and administrators paid close attention to local issues and worked hard to respond to these issues by using local resources in an informed, creative way. Many researchers point to the importance of analyzing local needs and resources, particularly in regard to supporting the professional development of all educators, including parents, teachers, and administrators (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Moll, 1990; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Stringfield, Datnow, Ross, & Snively, 1998).
Observations in these three schools provide some direction for addressing the inequities that English-language learners regularly experience in their education settings. The practices observed at Web and Trent—teaching students to work silently and independently and limiting them to interacting in only English or their home language to accomplish certain tasks—have their place in a well-balanced approach to second-language literacy development. In fact, these practices also took place at Olive Grove. Teachers and administrators, however, must work to give English-language learners more opportunities to interact with peers and teachers in their first and second languages and to use oral and written language in overlapping, mutually supportive ways as they engage in challenging, content-based tasks. ■

¹ All school and teacher names are pseudonyms.

References

- Dalton, S., & Sison, J. (1995). *Enacting instructional conversations with Spanish-speaking students in middle school mathematics* (Research Report No. 12). Washington, DC, & Santa Cruz, CA: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.
- Faltis, C., & Hudelson, S. (1998). *Bilingual education in elementary and secondary school communities*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Ferdman, B., Weber, R., & Ramírez, A. (1994). *Literacy across languages and cultures*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Gebhard, M. (2000). *SLA and school restructuring: Reconceiving classroom SLA as an institutional phenomenon*. Unpublished dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Gebhard, M. (2002). *Second language acquisition, hybridity, and school reform*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Gebhard, M. (in press). Fast capitalism, school reform, and classroom SLA. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59(1).
- Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Asato, J. (2001). "English for the children": The new literacy of the old work order, language policy, and educational reform. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24(1 & 2), 87-112.
- Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Turner, M. (1997). Putting language back into language arts. *Language Arts*, 74(5), 368-378.
- Hornberger, N. (1994). Continua of bi-literacy. In B. Ferdman, R. Weber, & A. Ramírez (Eds.), *Literacy across language and cultures*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Little, J. W., & Dorph, R. (1998). *Lessons about comprehensive school reform*. Berkeley, CA: SB 1274 School Restructuring Study, University of California, Berkeley.
- Louis, K. S., & Kruse, S. (1995). *Professionalism and community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Moll, L. (1990). *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociobistorical psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Newmann, F., & Wehlage, G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Madison, WI: Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

These classroom practices provided a complex web of support that enabled English-language learners to engage in challenging, content-based tasks.

- Olsen, L. (1994). *The unfinished journey: Restructuring schools in a diverse society*. San Francisco: California Tomorrow.
- Schoenbach, R., Greenleaf, C., Cziko, C., & Hurwitz, L. (1999). *Reading for understanding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Solsken, J., Willett, J., & Wilson-Keenan, J. (2000). Cultivating hybrid texts in multicultural classrooms. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35(2), 179-212.

- Stringfield, S., Datnow, A., Ross, S., & Snively, F. (1998). Scaling up school restructuring in multicultural, multilingual contexts. *Education and Urban Society*, 30(3), 326-357.
- Tharp, R. (1997). *From at-risk to excellence: Research, theory, and principles for practice*. (Research Report 1). The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence. Santa Cruz, California.
- Warren, B., Ballenger, C., Ogonowski, M., Rosebery, A., & Hudicourt, J. (2001). Rethinking diversity in learning science: The logic of everyday sense making. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 38(5), 529-552.

Meg Gebhard is an assistant professor at the School of Education, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and a former middle school English as a Second Language teacher; (413) 577-0863; gebhard@educ.umass.edu.

You can live in Thailand or Texas and take classes at TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

You may not be able to study at our New York City campus, but our classes can come to you. The Teachers College Distance Learning Project offers classes that use an interactive communications platform that can be accessed through the Internet. These online classes have the same richness of content and discussion as on-campus courses, but can be taken without leaving your hometown.

Courses are also offered in educational technology, cognition and staff development. Earn a certificate or credits that may be applied to a degree.

For information visit our website at <http://dlp.tc.columbia.edu> or call 888.633.6933



