



Strategic English Language Learning through Innovative Outreach and Collaboration

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Abstract

A variety of innovative and challenging strategies are being employed to assist English Language Learners (ELLs) from non-English speaking nations as they endeavor to develop language skills and meet the competing demands of contemporary language education. This presentation and paper focuses on four strategies and accompanying activities to strengthen outreach and language skills through experiential, collaborative language learning.

The following four strategies for English language learning are addressed:

- 1) *Home visits*
- 2) *Peer buddy programs*
- 3) *School community partnerships*
- 4) *Field experiences*

The focus on outreach has created the need for non-English speakers to learn through communication in a variety of settings external to the classroom. Outreach dominates informal as well as traditional language learning. Moreover, these opportunities have developed communication mechanisms that conform to informal, casual and unconstrained conversational patterns of spoken and written English. The difference between the formal classroom setting for language education and the external opportunities that tend to be more informal further complicate the process of learning to communicate effectively to other than a select audience or specific groups of people. The outreach opportunities listed above are growing in use in education and in language teaching in particular, in order to facilitate conversational vocabulary and language development among English Language Learners (ELLs) at all levels who have an ongoing need to acquire knowledge and skills. Engagement in these outreach activities has also significantly enhanced writing and reading accomplishments. The pedagogy and methodology employed to encourage students to confront diverging pathways in language learning and professionally contextual academic accomplishments is transformational and allows students to strengthen their skills and focus on the types of language acquisition strategies that work best for their learning style. This presentation will consider and explore each of the four strategies listed above and analyze the approach, process, facilitation and assessment as English language learners are simultaneously confronted with the challenges associated with communication and language acquisition. Resources and interviews will be included from specialists in each of these strategies. Implications of these emerging opportunities as well as supportive materials and recommendations will be presented.

Keywords: *Outreach, English Language Learning, Collaboration, Innovation;*

1. Introduction

Outreach and collaboration within the community is of utmost importance when focusing on the needs of English learners. The opportunity to communicate with parents and develop school partnerships that cross geographical and cultural frontiers is essential. There is a multiplicity of opportunities for outreach as ELL teachers and students tackle emerging complex and diverse needs within and outside of the classroom, coupled with the rapidly evolving economy and intercultural communication. This paper and accompanying presentation will highlight outreach activities that will make a significant difference in the lives of the students and strengthen educational experiences preparing students for the transcultural workforce that lies ahead. Home visits, peer buddy programs, school community partnerships and educational field experiences have the potential to make a lasting impact on the outcomes of English

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language learning while gaining knowledge and delving into the crucial relationships associated with student growth and success.

2. Home visits

It is important to understand that parents are the child's first teachers and are critically important partners in the educational process [1]. Parental support has tremendous advantages for student success. It has become evident that well qualified educators who reach out and offer home visits coupled with a cross cultural curriculum with bilingual content area courses have the potential to make a strong impact on the education of students. By establishing a positive rapport with parents and supporting both the home and school culture, a bond is created that is powerful when it comes to teamwork and collaboration between the home and the school. It may seem daunting for parents to receive a call from the teacher requesting a home visit, and there may be challenges associated with work schedules or language interpreters. School districts have specific policies regarding visits to students' homes and the protocol that needs to be followed. However, when students and parents realize that educators are interested in getting to know the family and concentrate on the whole child and his or her cultural background, significant steps are taken that impact the educational process. Not only is it an advantage for the student and his/her family, but the teacher grows and learns as he/she interacts with the family and the culture of the student. Allowing parents to share their knowledge with the school community results in teachers gaining more insight [2]. When students and their families realize that their culture is valued, learning becomes more relaxed and the teamwork that ensues positively impacts the motivation and educational endeavors of students. By building on what students already know and can do, further steps are made in the educational process. As positive rapport and student learning evolves, parents are encouraged and demonstrate pride and approval in their students' accomplishments [3].

3. Peer buddy programs

An increasing number of students are entering schools in the United States with limited educational experiences or formal schooling [4]. These students are being required to simultaneously develop academic language skills as well as master grade level content [4]. Peer buddy programs are designed to increase access to general education curricula and engagement in school activities. Other students are able to provide social and academic support to their ELL classmates and help them acquire the skills needed to succeed in the educational environment [4]. When students have the opportunity to interact with their peers and work in a team environment that provides direction from peers rather than adults, they are better able to adapt to the environment and to be more welcoming and accommodating to individual differences and needs.

The peer buddy model not only addresses challenges of new language learners, but it provides leadership skills and opportunities for those students who are serving as peers. Students who volunteer to serve as peers and mentors to ELL students participate in orientation activities that address program expectations, awareness, communication strategies, and suggestions for social interaction activities [5].

Educators are being asked to raise performance standards for all students, including ELLs and members of other underrepresented curricula and school activities [5]. Because educators, parents, politicians, and others argue that insufficient resources are available to address these educational initiatives, buddies and education peers can help teachers and administrators who are attempting to achieve goals by serving as an additional source of support to promote the success of students [5].

4. School community partnerships

The priority and importance of school community partnerships is receiving increased recognition. Flood and Anders point out that there is multidimensionality involved in teaching and being culturally responsive [6]. The emphasis on school community partnerships is definitely increasing in significance and these crucial connections have the ability to revolutionize the way that students, educators, parents and community members interact. By honing in on positive relationships and shared key aspects of education, positive strides are being made that serve students and are beneficial to all concerned. These valuable alliances are capable of unlocking the potential and supporting the delivery of improved educational endeavors for all participants. Valuable conversations among school community partners enable all



parties to integrate the skills and abilities of each resulting in positive outcomes and valuable contributions. Improving the awareness of all of those engaged in the educational process supports educators as they gain new skills and dispositions, and students receive more intensive support leading to positive outcomes for all constituents. This strategy is certainly a two-way street as it is imperative that community members increase their awareness in terms of what is transpiring in the school setting. Positive reinforcement takes place when community members can speak proudly about the school and the accomplishments of students. When educators further develop their knowledge of the community in which their students reside and its strengths and attributes, they can bring these positive aspects into the classroom and incorporate community engagement into the curriculum, resulting in significant gains for all constituents.

5. Field experiences

It is essential to prepare high quality educators to serve new language learners. Educators need to gain content and language acquisition skills and preservice teachers must have the opportunity to experience actual classroom settings complete with advantages and challenges in order to be prepared to enter the classroom on their own. The Bilingual site for educators and families of ELLs called *Colorin Colorado* recommends teaching strategies that will improve classroom learning for students [7]. During the field experience, teachers are encouraged to develop activities that are structured to support student-to-student or group interaction so that ELLs are required to use English to explain concepts and contribute to the work. Field experience opportunities that encourage the utilization of English language vocabulary and structures will play a critical role in language development. According to Filmore & Snow, educators need to help children learn and use aspects of language associated with the academic discourse of various subjects in the curriculum. [8]. Educators need to understand how language works so that they can select materials that will help them expand students' linguistic horizons [8]. Field experiences provide the opportunity to learn these skills and try them out in order to perfect classroom methodologies and strategically plan curriculum that serves the needs of students. In a study by Teague, he discovered that prospective teachers need considerable support and preparatory work coupled with continued guidance during field experiences [9]. Because preparing teachers to work with ELLs is a complex process and given the likelihood that all teachers will eventually work with ELLs, Teague suggests that it is imperative for teacher educators to offer interventions that will be optimally successful in ensuring that teachers develop deep knowledge, positive beliefs, as well as effective practice [9].

6. Conclusions

As we all confront diverging pathways in language learning in an effort to improve education and serve students in the best ways possible, a focus on outreach and the four strategies discussed in this paper will serve students, educators, parents and community members well. A collaborative and engaged team focused on the best interests of the students has the power to positively impact learning and to ensure student success. ELL parents want their children to succeed as much as any other parent. Regular, open and friendly communication from the teacher will make a significant difference in ELL parent participation [6]. Educators who are engaged and involved in the community have the power to strengthen relationships building bridges and strong connections. The more informed the parents are and the more engaged educators are in the community, the more likely it is that students will receive the support that they need to thrive and be successful.

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