MYTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

How research on second language learning can help us support our English language learners beyond their ESL classes.

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Myth or Reality?

- EOC teachers and staff are caring and creative.
Reality, of course!

...which is why I plan to present some relevant research findings on second language learning, give you some general strategies, and let y’all run with them.
Main Resources Used

Myths & Realities

Teaching English Language Learners
Myth or Reality?

- Teachers should not allow ESL students to use their native language in class because it will slow down their English language development.
Myth

- Allowing students to use their native language facilitates cognitive and academic growth.
- Research on bilingualism supports the notion that cognitive and academic skills transfer from one language to another and the use of the native language can mediate second language tasks so that students are better able to complete the L2 task.

(Hakuta, 1986; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000)
Myth or Reality?

- How much formal education ESL students have received in their native language often greatly affects how quickly they progress in schools.
Reality

- Results of a large-scale national study led researchers to conclude, “The strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement.”

(Thomas and Collier, 2001)
The Iceberg Analogy

First Language Surface Features

Second Language Surface Features

Common Underlying Proficiency

Central Operating System
Myth or Reality?

Once second language learners are able to speak reasonably fluently, their problems are likely to be over in school.
Myth

- The ability to speak a second language (especially in conversational settings) does not guarantee that a student will be able to use the language effectively in academic settings.
- The content of communication - what the language is about or relates to – can determine whether language is "easy" or "hard."
- Language used to communicate about objects and concrete concepts tends to place less of a cognitive load on learners than language about complex notions or abstract ideas.
- Language that expresses what one already knows and understands is less cognitively demanding than that which teaches a new concept or principle.

(Collier, 1989; Cummins & Swain, 1986)
BICS and CALPS

- **BICS = Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills**
  - Day to day language used to interact socially with people (on the bus, at parties, playing sports)

- **CALPS = Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency**
  - Formal academic learning – listening, learning, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material
Cognitively undemanding
simple language, everyday structures, familiar topics

Context-embedded
Face-to-face, gestures, facial expression, concrete objects of reference

Context-reduced
Lack of non-verbal cues, Abstract language

Cognitively demanding
Field specific vocabulary, complex language structures, abstract concepts, new ideas
Student Support Schema

COGNITIVELY UNDEMANDING TASKS [BICS]

- Copying from the Board
- Reading a Map
- Face-to-Face Conversation
- Selecting Food in the Lunchroom
- Directions or Illustrations [with visuals or diagrams]

- Following a Class Schedule
- Getting an Absence Excuse
- Telephone Conversation
- Written Directions, Instructions [no diagrams or illustrations]
- Oral Presentation
- Oral Classroom Directions [no gestures or body language]

COGNITIVELY DEMANDING TASKS [CALP]

- Demonstrations
- Science Experiments
- Basic Math Computations
- Social Studies Lesson [with visuals and graphics]

- Standardized Tests
- Math Concepts and Applications
- Listening to a Lecture
- Reading Content Class
- Textbooks [Science, Social Studies, Literature]

Strategies for Supporting CALPS

- Start with context embedded activities.
- Read culturally relevant materials or connect to their culture.
- Supplement with visuals or graphs.
- Explain multiple word meanings and idioms.
- Encourage questions.
Myth or Reality?

- ESL students need about one year in which to learn enough English to be able to succeed academically.
Myth

- There is great variability in how quickly ESL students learn English and in the type of proficiency they reach in conversational and literacy situations. However, most ESL students need from seven to ten years in order to acquire academic English on a level comparable to their native-speaking peers.

(Cummins, 2000)
Myth or Reality?

- Focusing on phonics and decoding in English is the best way to help ESL students become successful readers.
Myth

- Reading involves much more than decoding, and placing undue emphasis on phonics and word level decoding at the expense of vocabulary development and comprehension can be detrimental to the reading success of ELLs.

- The adoption of a heavy phonics approach to teaching ELLs to read is highly controversial, in part because such an approach: a) typically places undue emphasis on one aspect of reading, decoding, b) often masks the importance of comprehension in reading, and c) doesn’t take into account the difficulties that many newcomers to English experience with the sounds of English.

(Leaux, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006)
Phonics Vs. Phonemic Awareness

- Phonemes are sounds that make a difference (pin/pen). Phonemic awareness helps ESL students discriminate between sounds and aids in understanding.

- Phonics relies on sounds and print. Phonemic awareness helps ESL students connect sounds and symbols by contrasting sounds that are not phonemes in their language (rapid/rabid, beach/bitch).
macci = man

nadica heradzapa = we eat more
Strategies for Phonemic Awareness

- Minimal pairs (words that are the same except for one phoneme or sound difference)
- Tongue twisters
- Poetry
- Musical lyrics
- Read aloud
Myth or Reality?

- Readability formulas are a good way to determine if ESL students can understand a text.
Myth

- Unfortunately, it appears that not only some, but nearly all, uses of readability formulas violate the basic assumptions on their applicability. Rigorous adherence to these assumptions effectively prevents use of readability formulas for TV captioning, adaptation, selection of texts for readers of different cultural backgrounds, designing special texts for children, selection of text passages, choosing trade books, or designing remedial readers, and restricts readability formula use to trivial cases of little import for educational or social policy.

- The real factors that affect readability are elements such as the background knowledge of the reader, the purpose of the reader relative to the purpose of the writer, and the purpose of the person who is presenting the text to the reader. These factors cannot be captured in a simple formula and ignoring them may do more harm than good.

(Bruce, Rubin, & Starr, 1981)
The batsmen were merciless against the bowlers. The bowlers placed their men in slips and covers. But to no avail. The batsmen hit one four after another with an occasional six. Not once did a ball look like it would hit their stumps or be caught.
The men were at bat against the bowlers. They did not show any pity. The bowlers placed their men in slips. They placed their men in covers. It did not help. The batsmen hit a lot of fours. They hit some sixes. No ball hit the stumps. No ball was caught.
Strategies for Developing Reading

- LEA (Language Experience Approach) – students read what they have written.
- Provide culturally familiar reading material.
- Use graphic novels (fiction and nonfiction) and picture books.
- Anticipate reading mix-ups due to phonemic or grammatical confusion (*The rapid dog.* vs. *The rabid dog.*)
- Teach and explain vocabulary in context rather than as lists of words and definitions.
- Supplement reading materials with real life experiences and videos.
- Explain idioms and slang.
- Teach cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies that successful readers use: visualizing, predicting, asking questions, inferring and making connections.
- Encourage independent reading.
Myth or Reality?

- Most grammatical errors that second language learners make are **not** the result of their native language.
Reality

- Research has shown that most errors that second-language learners make are **not** the result of their native language, but the developmental order in which English is acquired, and this is shared across languages. Some of these errors are similar to those that young children make learning their first language.

  (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1985)
Grammatical Acquisition Order of Second Language Learners

- Word Order (in simple declarative sentences)
  Nominative & Accusative Case in pronouns (*he, him*)

- Plural (excluding long plural –es, e.g., *boxes, dishes*)
  Copula (*to be*, e.g., *is, are*)
  Progressive (*-ing*)

- Irregular Past (*went*)
  Possessive (*’s*)
  Conditional Auxiliary (*would*)
  Long Plural (*-es*, e.g., *boxes, dishes*)
  3rd Person Singular (*-s*, e.g., *He sings.*)

- Perfect Auxiliary (*have*, e.g., *I have eaten.*)
  Past Participle (*-en*, e.g., *I have eaten.*)
Myth or Reality?

- ESL students learn grammar best through practice drills and worksheets.
Myth

- Grammar development is usage-based, not rule-based.
- ESL students acquire language by understanding messages; teachers can play an important role by providing a rich array of language experiences. These experiences should be natural, not artificial, and include activities that students enjoy, opportunities to play with language, and opportunities to use language to process, create, and express ideas in ways that are cognitively stimulating.
- Some older ESL students may find comfort in the explicit teaching of grammar points, especially if their previous learning of languages has focused on form and structure rather than communication. However, grammar drills should play a limited role in the classroom.

(Krashen & Scarcella, 1982; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Taylor & Samway 2008)
Strategies for Grammar Development

- Encourage reading and listening in English at an appropriate level.
- Ask questions to clarify, but don’t correct.
- Provide opportunities for many kinds of writing.
- Peer and whole class editing of students’ writing.
- Use metacognitive think out louds about grammar use during conferences or whole-class writing and reading (e.g., Why did the writer use the past tense here and the present tense later?).
- Role-play (job interviews, at the doctor’s office) so students have a chance to use a variety of structures.
- Give explicit instruction on grammar test taking.
- Encourage and address grammar questions, but don’t let ESL students bog the class down in the minutiae of grammar and punctuation.
Myth or Reality

- Language and culture are related.
Reality

- Language is more than just a means of communication. It influences our culture and even our thought processes.
Two Cultural Constructs

CAMPING

CAMPING
Strategies for Cultural Awareness

- Learn about the cultures of our students.
- Be aware of different expectations about learning and social roles in classroom (e.g., volunteering to speak, asking questions).
- Invite discussion of multiple meaning of words.
- Encourage students to share information about their culture and language.
- Be sensitive to signs of depression or post traumatic stress.
- Work closely with counselors.
If you change how people talk, that changes how they think. If people learn another language, they also learn a new way of looking at the world.

Boroditsky, 2010