Teaching English as a Second Language: Pedagogical Principles

Jim Cummins

Dr. Cummins is a professor in the modern language Centre and Curriculum Department of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of numerous research projects, which center primarily on the challenges of the bilingual and culturally diverse classroom.

Five Pedagogical Principles

Value Students’ Cultural Backgrounds

1. The educational and personal experiences students bring to schools constitute the foundation for all their future learning; schools should therefore attempt to amplify rather than replace these experiences. Schools communicate subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) messages to students regarding the value of prior experiences and the appropriateness of their language and culture within the broader societal context. Research suggests that students who are valued by the wider society (and by the schools that inevitably try to reflect that society) succeed to a greater extent than students whose backgrounds are devalued (see Ogbu, 1978). Thus, students’ cultural identities are likely to be validated by instructional programs that attempt to add English to the language(s) that students bring to school while encouraging them to continue developing their first language oral and written skills. On the other hand, programs that attempt to replace students’ first language with English may undermine the personal and cultural confidence that is essential to students’ academic progress.

In addition, as suggested by the interdependence principle, the conceptual knowledge that students possess in their first language constitutes a major component of the “cognitive power” that they bring to the language learning situation. It thus makes sense to value, and where possible, continue to cultivate these abilities both for their own sake and to facilitate transfer to English.

Be Prepared to Support Students Long-Term

2. The fact that upwards of five years may be required for students to reach a level of academic proficiency in English comparable to their native-English-speaking peers suggests that schools must be prepared to make a long-term commitment to support the academic development of students. There are several implications of the different time periods required to develop peer-appropriate levels of conversational and academic language skills. First, it is clearly not sufficient just to get students over the initial difficulties of acquiring English. Student progress must be monitored for several years after they appear to be comfortable in English to ensure that they are coping with and acquiring an ability to manipulate the more formal abstract language that becomes increasingly important for school success as students advance through the grades.
Keep Students Integrated
Another implication is that second language provision cannot be conceptualized as a separate program that exists apart from the mainstream of the educational system. Withdrawal of students from the regular classroom may sometimes be necessary and appropriate in the early stages of learning, but it is not a viable option for the length of time that the student may need support in mastering the academic aspects of English. Thus, it is likely that all teachers in a school will be required to address the learning needs of second language students by individualizing their instruction to take account of the very different levels of English proficiency and the different rates of learning represented among these students.

Emphasize Classroom Interaction
3. Together with the attributes (e.g., L1 literacy) that students bring to the learning situation, access to interaction with users of English is a major causal variable underlying both the acquisition of English and students’ sense of belonging to the mainstream society; the entire school is therefore responsible for supporting the learning and interactional needs of students, and second language provision should integrate students into the social and academic mainstream to the extent possible. Enright and McCloskey (1988) have clearly expressed the importance of genuine interaction in the classroom and the relationship between this point and the first principle outlined:

Students fully develop second language and literacy through using the second language in many different settings, with a wide variety of respondents and audiences (including themselves), and for a wide variety of purposes.

. . . Students’ language and literacy development is facilitated by a comfortable atmosphere: one that values, encourages and celebrates efforts to use language; that focuses primarily on the meaning and intention of utterances and messages rather than on their form; and that treats "errors" as a normal part of becoming increasingly better thinkers and communicators. (p. 21)

An emphasis on interaction in the classroom is clearly related to an instructional orientation that values and attempts to amplify students’ prior experiences.

Provide Support for Students and Mainstream Teachers
Following Handscombe (1989), it is important to emphasize that a focus on promoting interaction with native speakers does not imply placement of students into regular classrooms without provision of additional support for both students and their teachers. Nor does it imply a pull-out program that offers support in a segregated setting for part of the day and mainstreaming for the rest. What tends to happen in this case is that many students flounder in the mainstream part of the day because no support has been provided to student or teacher in that context. At the same time, both teacher and student tend to assume that the short period of pull-out assistance is the learning for the day and the rest is a kind of marking time until increased proficiency is acquired through the language program.
What is required is the provision of instructional strategies within the mainstream classroom that are appropriate for all students, for example, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, creative writing and project-oriented activities. Such activities are effective for academic and language development as well as for intercultural understanding. A frequently neglected aspect of culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms is the opportunity provided to teachers to explore curricular topics from many different cultural perspectives. By recognizing diversity as an educationally valuable resource, teachers not only validate the cultural backgrounds of students but also offer all students expanded possibilities for cultural enrichment.

**Integrate Language Learning with Content**

4. *If students are to catch up academically with their native-English-speaking peers, their cognitive growth and mastery of academic content must continue while English is being learned. Thus, the teaching of English as a second language should be integrated with the teaching of other academic content that is appropriate to students’ cognitive level. By the same token, all content teachers are also teachers of language. As has been discussed, language learning is a process that takes time; students may require at least five years to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers in academic aspects of English. Clearly, students’ cognitive growth and their learning of subject matter content cannot be postponed until their English language skills are developed to the level of their classmates. In recognition of this reality, educators have increasingly emphasized the importance of integrating language teaching with the teaching of academic content. Thus, effective instruction, whether in mainstreamed or pull-out classes, will simultaneously promote language, cognition and content mastery. In the absence of this integration, the already formidable task that students face in catching up to their native-English-speaking peers will be rendered considerably more difficult.*

The modifications to the instructional program required to integrate language and content in a manner appropriate for students do not entail a dilution in the conceptual or academic content of the instruction, but rather require the adoption of instructional strategies that take account of students’ academic background and ensure comprehension of the material being presented. For example, Mohan (1986) and Early (1990) have emphasized the role of *key visuals* (e.g., diagrams, graphs, timelines, etc.) as a means of adapting content for second language learners and making new information at least partially understandable.

*In short, content-based language instruction is particularly appropriate to address the learning needs of ESL students and help them bridge the linguistic and academic gap between themselves and native-English-speaking students.*

**Promote Family and Community Involvement**

5. *The academic and linguistic growth of students is significantly increased when parents see themselves and are seen by school staff as co-educators along with the school. Schools should therefore actively seek to establish a collaborative relationship with minority parents that encourages them to participate with the*
school in promoting their children’s academic progress. The most clear-cut evidence of the academic benefits that can accrue to students as a result of the establishment of a collaborative relationship between the school and parents is found in the two-year educational experiment conducted in the borough of Haringey, a working-class area of London, England, by Tizard, Schofield and Hewison (1982). The experiment consisted in having parents listen on a regular basis to their children read books sent home from school. These children’s reading progress was compared to that of children who were given additional reading instruction in small groups several times a week by a trained reading specialist. Many parents in the district spoke little or no English and many were illiterate in both English and their first language (Greek and Bengali, for the most part). Despite these factors, parents almost without exception welcomed the project and agreed to listen to their children read as requested and to complete a record card showing what had been read.

It was found that children who read to their parents made significantly greater progress in reading than those who were given additional reading instruction, and this was particularly so for children who, at the beginning of the project, were experiencing difficulty learning to read. In addition, most parents expressed great satisfaction at being involved in this way by the schools, and teachers reported that the children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved. Lack of literacy or English fluency did not detract from parents’ willingness to collaborate with the school, nor did it prevent improvement in these children’s reading.

In general, successful parental involvement is likely to depend on the extent to which parents see the school as a welcoming environment rather than the intimidating environment it often is to many parents with limited knowledge of English. Clearly, the presence in the school of staff who speak the language of the parents will greatly facilitate parental involvement. The persistent exclusion of bilingual and multilingual professionals from school staffs conveys an unambiguous message to parents and students about the power relations that are operating in the school and society.

Establish Partnerships

School staffs and individual teachers, however, also have the potential (and responsibility) to begin the process of establishing partnerships with parents of second language students. When educators define their roles in terms of challenging the discrimination embodied in institutionalized structures, then there are many possibilities for involving parents in their children’s education and providing a welcoming atmosphere in the school. The initiative explored by Tizard, et. al. (1982) study is just one example; there are many more ranging from family literacy and social history projects (e.g., Ada, 1988; Lopes & Lopes, 1991) to stocking the library with books in the languages of the community or the simple strategy of providing bilingual or multilingual signs in the school (Enright & McCloskey, 1988).

Such project and activities will only be successful when they reflect an underlying role definition that challenges the societal power structure that has
historically excluded parents from subordinated groups from genuine participation. The initiative for the dismantling of barriers to participation may come from parents and students rather than from educators (see Skutnakk-Kangas, 1988, for an account of a strike by Finnish parents and students in Sweden), but regardless of where the initiative originates, the goal for educators, individually and collectively, should be to strive towards a genuine two-way collaboration where parent and student voice can confidently find expression within the school. Clearly, this process is more likely to occur when the entire school community is committed to social justice and actively reflects and values the diversity of languages and cultures represented in the school; however, this type of consensus within schools is rarely the case, and thus it is incumbent on individual educators to initiate collaborative relationships between school and community.

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References


