Effective Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners
http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/teaching/esl/print.htm

Barriers to Meaningful Instruction for English Learners (Meyer, 2000)

This article focuses on effective ways teachers can help ESL students overcome barriers to meaningful instruction. Teachers can use strategies based on social interactionist theory, such as that of Vygotsky, to create classroom conditions that foster learning by **modeling, scaffolding and helping students to construct understanding**, with the eventual goal of becoming **independent thinkers and problem solvers**. The author identifies four loads as barriers to meaningful instruction: **cognitive load**, **culture load**, **language load** and **learning load**; and she states teachers must be skilled at lowering these barriers and sparking student interest and curiosity by developing a creative, wise and passionate curriculum.

**Cognitive load** refers to the number of new concepts embedded in a lesson. It is critical that we consistently assess **prior knowledge** of all students, ESL students particularly, and look to identify the concepts and skills the students do and do not possess. We must then fill in any conceptual gaps by trying to relate new concepts to life experiences of ESL students. Thus, it becomes more critical to get to know and understand these students.

'**Culture load**' refers to the way language and culture are related and the amount of cultural knowledge required to comprehend meaning or participate in an activity. Meanings of words are determined by the uses of words within linguistic and cultural settings, never the same in any two cultures. English learners need to learn the words in English as well as the cultural background that gives the words their English meaning. They need to learn words in context to understand the meaning. Additionally, the information conveyed in our textbooks and lessons is culturally embedded. Some texts or topics can actually be culturally offensive. **Culture load** also refers to how teachers expect interaction to occur in a classroom. This would **include** when to speak, when to stay silent, when to raise hands and **when to write**. These expectations vary from one culture to the next. English learners are often expected to determine the classroom behavioral norms independently.

The author offers several strategies to help teachers lighten the culture load for students. Teachers should treat English learners with respect, not judgment, and try to build personal relationships with students, their families and communities. Teachers can use information gained through these relationships to develop lessons and activities that help students understand the American culture while still respecting the culture of the student. By demonstrating respect for students, teachers allow a door of trust to open that can serve to further deepen a nurturing teacher-student relationship.

The next barrier, the '**language load**,' refers to the number of unfamiliar words encountered as an English learner reads a text or listens to teacher or peer academic talk. Teachers can lighten this load by rewriting or explaining text material. Complex sentences can be broken down into comprehensible parts. Academic vocabulary can be presented at the start of a lesson and highlighted. Several different texts can be available covering the same content but at different reading ability levels. Additionally, teachers should model both academic and social language and scaffold its appropriate use to help the learner acquire it, use it effectively and move to more sophisticated levels of speaking and writing.

The '**learning load**' represents what teachers expect students to do with English in the learning activities. An example offered by the author is brainstorming, an activity that is oral and fast-paced, with few visual examples and minimal clarification in the initial stages. An English learner would have difficulty following such an activity, let alone participating. Thus, teachers must carefully consider the learning load of all activities involving English learners, making adaptations and offering supports accordingly. One such strategy is the language bath. This strategy involves the teacher doing the initial talking about a new topic and students listening before any brainstorming or other activity is assigned. This strategy is also effective with English speaking students. It prepares students to participate by helping to familiarize them with vocabulary and develop their thoughts on a topic.
The last concept discussed is what the author calls the "yearning goad," which is intrinsic motivation, a drive to know and learn more. This needs to be cultivated by teaching, whenever possible, through topics of high student interest. Teachers should also endeavor to broaden student interests by sharing their passions with students. Critical selection and creative implementation of curriculum are also important. By lightening even one or two of these loads and arranging meaningful learning for students, teachers can motivate students and facilitate learning of both the English language and content. This can help ESL students avoid being misinterpreted as unmotivated or resistant to learning.

**Analysis/Plans for Application to Teaching**

**By: Karen Pellino**

While I will not be a certified ESL teacher when I begin my teaching career, I plan to pursue certification in this area. Regardless of whether I am in a regular classroom, special education classroom, ESL classroom or a bilingual classroom, the information contained in these articles will be of great value to me considering the diverse cultural population our schools serve. There will undoubtedly be children who are English language learners in my classes or in activities that I am involved in. I will encounter them when I perform the various duties teachers are assigned to (bus duty, lunch duty etc.). Additionally, the strategies recommended in these four articles seem to be effective strategies to use with all students, not just ESL students.

As time consuming as it may be, learning about the students, their cultures and their communities may be among the most important and productive developmental activities I can undertake as a teacher. This can provide a wealth of information about students and their worlds. While I am sure there would be many differences between their cultures and mine, I expect there would be some similarities as well. Attending or participating in community events or visiting families would very likely be a sensitizing experience for me. I would personally find out how it feels to be the "different" person. I think that this would help to deepen my respect for the students and their cultures. It would also send a message to students that I am committed to helping them and interested in them as people.

Relationships with families are critical. I suspect lack of parental involvement may often be misinterpreted as lack of caring. Non-English speaking parents may feel they have no way to communicate with teachers. They are in a new world too and are experiencing all of the things that their children are experiencing in addition to having the added responsibilities of work and caring for their families. Additional effort needs to be made to reach these parents and open the lines of communication. I would invite them to participate in meaningful activities in school, ask them to be class volunteers, and make a special effort to recognize the accomplishments of their children. I would make an extra effort to explain the expectations of both parents and students in our schools, especially if they are newcomers (Boothe, 2000). I would enlist the help of a translator when possible, if language is a barrier.

Written communications sent home should be translated into their native language, whenever possible. There are resources available on the internet that provide translations at no cost. Alta Vista (http://Babel.altavista.com/tr?) offers free translations of text in the following languages: Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Russian. Research-it (www.itools.com/research-it) offers free translation of web pages into Spanish, German, French, Japanese, Italian, Portuguese and Chinese. Once my class web site is developed, I will also be able to use it to further communication with parents. Just because they are non-English speaking does not mean they do not have access to computers. Depending on socio-economic status, they may have computers at home. If not, they have access at local libraries or other community agencies. Contacts made in the community, foreign language instructors and other staff members in our schools could also help with translation. I would try to arrange partnerships between bi-lingual families and non-English speaking families, depending on their languages and encourage parents and family members who do not speak English to learn English by informing them of resources available in the community.
I believe that cultivating caring, engaged relationships with students and their families will help my students to feel connected to their school and, hopefully, enhance their feelings about school and their self-esteem. I would like to be remembered as a teacher that cared, one that made a difference in their lives. By learning about students, their cultures, and their communities I will be better able to identify what resources the students bring to the learning experience. I will also be better able to draw on prior knowledge, experiences and strengths to help build new knowledge and build connections for students (Lucas, 2000).

There are so many factors that influence the lives and learning of ESL students: immigration history, language use, socio-economic status, educational history and leisure activities. There are so many questions to find out answers to. What kind of responsibilities do they have at home? Are they considered adults or children? Are they recent immigrants? Were they born here? Where else have they lived? What is their schooling history? By finding out more about my students, I can personalize their experience at school and in my classroom to a greater extent.

Because of the great difficulties and challenges faced by ESL students, I plan to develop and incorporate activities into my lessons to encourage an appreciation for diversity among students. I will find ways to celebrate diversity of all students: to enrich learning; foster peer relationships; create respect for differences; create an understanding of other cultures; and instill a sense of belonging or membership (Shore, 2001). I intend to approach each student (ESL, regular education or special needs) as an individual, taking into consideration personality characteristics (shy or outgoing for example), learning style, educational experience, special talents and interests, social and familial situation.

I plan to use cooperative learning as a means to promote interaction among students. This will allow students time for social interaction and enable them to develop confidence in their language skills (Boothe, 2000). Through participation in cooperative learning they will have a chance to speak and listen. Verbal activities promote collaboration among students. Verbal interaction is fundamental to learning both language and content. ESL students need the opportunity to use language in interaction with both peers and teachers who are competent in the language and serve as models (Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001). Cooperative learning will afford the opportunity to develop relationships with their peers; and their peers will, hopefully, begin to value the ESL students for who they are as opposed to just "kids who don't speak English." I plan to utilize some sensitizing activities in class as well, regardless of whether I have ESL or inclusion class or a regular education class. I feel that these are profound experiences that give those involved a taste of humanity and a taste of humility, both of which can help us gain a better understanding of ourselves and the diverse people we live, work and learn with (Rudnick, 1995).

I plan to develop scaffolding activities and accommodations that will help my students to: organize their thoughts, develop study skills, organize their schedules, consistently follow classroom procedures, and track their progress throughout the school year (Boothe, 2000). By assigning classroom jobs or responsibilities to ESL or special needs students I will involve them in the class and help them to feel as if they belong and have value. I will encourage them to share any personal experiences with the class that they feel comfortable sharing and to also maintain a personal journal about themselves and their experiences (written in English or their native language).

Through all of the articles I have read, I think it was quite clear that ESL students should be encouraged to maintain their native language. The benefits of a maintenance program as opposed to a transition program seem to be paramount. It is so critical for children to have a strong sense of self in order to achieve. Their native language is part of their "self." They need confidence to develop friendships, problem solve, and master skills in language and content areas. They should not be ashamed of who they are or their origins. They need their native language in order to maintain valuable relationships with family members and friends who do not speak English.

The role that a teacher plays in the lives of students and the teacher's potential to improve the quality of life for students cannot be underestimated. Elementary school teachers have a major effect on how children will view school, possibly for the next twelve years of their lives. This effect can be
compounded when students do not speak English. In order to foster acceptance, self-confidence, learning, and achievement, teachers of ESL students need to make the classroom a haven for children, create meaningful learning situations for their students, and never give up on them (Thompson, 2000).

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References

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- Alta Vista, http://Babel.altavista.com/tr?
- Research-it, www.itools.com/research-it