“What Must Every Educator Know to Teach a Diverse Population?”
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We can tell a lot about what educators think teachers ought to know by looking at what’s covered in teacher education programs. Teachers are obviously expected to know the subjects they teach, and how to impart the school’s curriculum effectively to their students. Beyond that, they are expected to have skills in general pedagogy, a good understanding of children’s development, and, perhaps, some knowledge of culture. The study of language, however, as language arts or English as a second language. Virtually no attention is given to the importance of language in the educational process. In my remarks today, I will argue that knowledge of the widespread ignorance of how language figures in teaching and learning is key to understanding a number of problems that have been plaguing our educational system, and I will try to show that knowledge of certain facts about language is crucial to teachers who work in a diverse society.
Over the past decade or so, there have been some substantial changes in educational policy aimed at improving the quality of American schools. We have adopted higher standards for academic performance, and imposed tougher accountability measures on schools and students. To date, 26 states have adopted qualifying tests for high school graduation, requiring students to pass tests of English literacy and mathematics to graduate from high school. Students who don’t pass these tests will receive a certificate of attendance instead of a diploma, even if they have taken and passed all the coursework required for graduation. How will this affect the many students in our schools who are not now doing as well as they should because of language differences? We do a reasonably good job educating children who come from mainstream backgrounds. We do a poor job with children who come from low income, ethnic minority, and immigrant families, especially if they speak languages or varieties of English other than the standard one spoken by the mainstream. We do an especially poor job with some groups — Latinos, African-Americans, and Native Americans. Can these students handle the new requirements without some instructional attention from teachers who have a clearer understanding than they do now of the language issues involved in teaching and learning?

I have been doing some linguistic research in Yup’ik Eskimo villages along the Yukon River in Alaska where educators are predicting that the failure rate on the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination will be around 90%. The scores are not yet in for the first cohort of students to take the test — the graduating class of 2002. These students will get more than one chance to take and pass the exam, but given the overall poor performance of rural students in the state’s reading and math achievement tests, Alaskan educators are worried. A major source of concern is that the Native Alaskan children in the rural villages speak a variety of English called “Bush” or “Village English.” That fact, together with a widely held belief that the children in those villages are nearly all affected by fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), cause teachers to have little hope of raising literacy and math learning to levels required for passing the exam. My study of the language resources of the children in the region suggests that the dialect they speak could not be regarded as a barrier to learning; it is full and rich, and in most children, well developed. And after interviewing 70% of the children in one community, ages 5 through 18, and 68% in another, I found no evidence to support the rumors of widespread FAS. My research team and I encountered just 3 children who showed any evidence of cognitive disabilities, the cause of which we could not say.

And that brings me to the question of what happens when teachers do not know enough about language to discriminate between language differences and language disabilities. When children showed up at school speaking a variety of English that is not valued by the school, teachers often draw certain conclusions about them: they are unprepared for school, their parents have neglected them, there is something wrong with them.

As I said, looked at closely, the language spoken in places like rural Alaska is indeed different from Standard English. It is a distinctive dialect of English with a unique history, and it serves the communicative needs of the many people who speak it. It shares much of the grammar and vocabulary of Standard English, and there is no reason why it
would constitute a barrier to English literacy. In many places of the world, including much of the Arabic speaking world of China, children speak one language or language variety, and they learn to read and write in another, without apparent difficulty. Such situations have been described as diglossic, and the adjustments that children learn to make in moving between the spoken vernacular and the language used in school for literacy purposes are substantial – certainly not less than the adjustments Alaskan children have to make to cope with the English of written texts. To do that, though the Alaskan children would need to have the kind of instructional help that recognizes the linguistic issues involved.

**In our schools, because teachers lack linguistic perspective, language differences tend to be treated as learning problems.** This is true even in places like California where teachers have had ample experience dealing with language differences since 43% of the nation’s limited English proficient students (LEP) attend school there. A look at what happens when children show up in classrooms – at whatever grade – without English and without a background in literacy is revealing. A third grade teacher described her approach to children who do not speak or read English: “one must get right to the basics, because such children could never handle the cognitively demanding task of learning in school until you build a foundation in the language itself.” What this teacher is saying might seem reasonable until we see where she goes with it. As she told Meg Gebhard, who documented the beliefs and practices of teachers in schools with large numbers of non-English speakers: “Students have to be taught the very basics first: phonics, vowel sounds, all the letters of the alphabet, all in English. Then one gives the most basic words, consonant – vowel – consonant: cat, bat, rat, dog, can hat. That sort of thing. The real

**We often find this kind of confusion among educators about the difference between learning a language and learning to read in a language.** The instructional strategy described here might make sense as a way to teach reading. It makes little sense in teaching a new language to children. The units of language structure that comprise the sounds of speech are far removed from the meanings, experiences and contexts needed for making sense of a language. For children who haven’t learned to read in their own language to work at matching written symbols that are new to them with sounds that are meaningless to them is at the very least an inefficient way to get started learning a new language. It would take forever to learn the language as described, and it would be the rare learner who would be inspired by reading materials like the ones described by the teacher. As a result of approaches like this, many children are delayed in learning English and learning to read in English.

**What happens when children do not learn to read quickly and well, or when they do not learn English as successfully as they should?** They eventually get labeled “learning disabled,” and are placed in special education programs. Children who have problems learning English as a second language . . . often end up in special education programs because many schools lack the expertise required to diagnose their problems and to design learning experiences that would allow them to make better progress in school.
Given the problems our schools have had in the teaching of English language and literacy, a great many children are in special education although their learning problems stem from inadequate instruction rather than from any real learning disability.

The question of reading instruction brings us to another problem stemming from educators not knowing enough about language. There is a widespread belief among people in education – administrators, teachers, and people who create, publish and select textbooks – that texts containing short sentences are easier to understand than texts composed of longer sentences. Children who are deemed to be underprepared to deal with the school’s curriculum – low income, minority, and LEP students – are seldom given the same materials other students receive. The materials they get are watered down and simplified, sometimes to a degree where it is hard to find much substance in them. One teacher described the materials she was using with her fourth grade ES: students to Meg Gebhard (again paraphrasing): “First grade materials, very basic – it isn’t see Spot

The question we might ask is whether or not greatly simplified materials like that help or hurt the process. Alice Davison and Robert Kantor (1982) looked at what happens when texts are modified to make them more readable according to the readability formulas used by textbook publishers. Davison and Kantor found that such texts are often more difficult to interpret, requiring the reader to infer meaning relations between sentences which are lost when complex sentences are broken into component parts. What is often eliminated in the effort to keep sentences and texts short are all those devices that show the rhetorical or narrative connections between ideas.

A major problem with simplified texts is that they do not represent well the way the language works. The texts students read can give them access to the variety of English which is used in academic settings, as long as their teachers help them see how it works, and the texts themselves are well-formed instances of grade level-appropriate language. From such texts, students can learn the vocabulary, grammatical structures, phraseology, and rhetorical devices that are used especially in academic writing; it is the surest source for such language and certainly a better source than spoken language. The learning of this register of English is an issue not only for LEP students but for native speakers of English too.

Few children arrive at school fully competent in the language required for text interpretation and for the kind of reasoned discourse we assume is a key to becoming an educated person. Possible exceptions are the children of academics and highly educated professionals who use this register even at home, who read a lot to their children, and who engage them in discussions about a wide range of topics. For the most part, academic English is learned at school from teachers and from books. The most reliable sources of such language are written texts. But written materials serve as the basis for language development only when teachers call children’s attention to how language is used in them. Teachers help students acquire the academic register when they go beyond discussions of meanings and interpretations of the materials to discussions that focus on
the language used in the texts: for example, on why the author might have used one particular word rather than another, on meaning relations between clauses and sentences in the text, on how the writer invites the reader to make certain inferences, and so on.

This brings me to the final issue I shall discuss today: the lack of understanding of how children learn a second language, and what role teachers have got to play in the process. In places like California, LEP students are finding it more and more difficult to learn English well. There are many who have not mastered English even after 10 or more years in English – only classrooms, students who are known to their teachers are “ESL-Lifers.” Policy-makers and members of the public have blamed bilingual education for this problem, believing that it has allowed students to avoid learning English. Voters in California acted on this belief when they passed Proposition 227 two years ago, banning bilingual education and limited LEP students to just one year of ESL instructional support for learning English.

But let’s look at this situation closely. Less than 30% of the 1.4 million LEP students in California were receiving any form of bilingual education in the years before Proposition 227, and these problems in English language development affect 40% of all LEP students. In fact, the problem is not that of students wanting to avoid English. Anyone who has worked closely with immigrant students and has given any attention to their language behavior in and out of school knows that the social pressures to learn and to use English in our society are so powerful and unavoidable that few children can resist. They want desperately to be English speakers. While children may continue to use their primary language in informal interactions with classmates who speak that language even in school, the inclination to speak English is so great that many children put aside their primary languages as soon as they have learned enough English to get by. Once they do, it becomes their language of everyday discourse, even with friends and family members with whom they might communicate more easily in their first language. This is true even of children who have difficulty learning English. Many of the students who have had difficulty learning English no longer speak their primary languages, having abandoned them in the belief that the continued use of those languages might keep them from learning English well.

Why then do some children have difficulty learning English even after years of exposure to it in schools? I will argue that it is because they are not getting enough instructional help in school. It is often assumed that children can learn English naturally just by being in classrooms where instruction is conducted in English. This might even work, if there were just a few children who might give them access to English, and the classroom were organized in a way that facilitated interactions between English learners and English-speaking classmates. Then the learners would have frequent enough opportunities to discover how English works and what it is the English speakers know that allows them to communicate with one another.

But few LEP students find themselves in ideal settings for language and learning. Instead, they are often in classrooms and schools where there are few classmates who know English well enough to provide access and support for learning it well, and a lot of social
pressure to learn and to use the language. And so they do. If the teacher is not helping them discover how English works in designed instructional activities, the children turn to one another for help. But since their classmates are all novices in the languages, no one really knows what English is or is not. The result of such language learning is something I have called “learnerese” – an imperfect, interlanguage variety of English which can eventually become the end product of the language learning process. It is different enough from standard English for educators to conclude that there must be something wrong with the learners.

Craig Wilson has documented what happens to these students after they are judged to be proficient enough in English to be mainstreamed. Following a group of LEP students into their high school classes, he finds that although they are immersed in English, they get help neither in English nor in learning the materials that are covered in class. They sit in their classes – as close to the door as possible – day after day, getting little out of what teachers and classmates are saying. They may copy every word or squiggle what the teacher writes on the board, perhaps in the hope of making sense of their notes later; or they do nothing. They are seldom called on to speak and they never volunteer anything. Are these students being prepared to deal with California’s high school qualifying test which goes into effect in 2004? I wonder, I really do.

I will end where I began. What do teachers need to know about language to teach in a diverse society? A lot more that they presently do.