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The ABC of Teaching Diverse Learners

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The ABC of Teaching Diverse Learners

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Vicky Giouroukakis and Andrea Honigsfeld present their A-Z of culturally and linguistically responsive practices

As the impending Common Core State Standards (CCSS) seem sure to entail even more assessment in most states, there are increasing demands for teachers to adequately prepare all their students to meet the new standards and achieve passing scores on high-stakes, standardized state assessments. Teachers around the U.S. today are facing new standards, new assessments, and new curricula that they will need to study and incorporate quickly in order to comply with state and federal requirements while doing their best to provide quality education for all of their students.

Educators of English language Learners (ELLs) face added challenges because they need to develop and implement not only standards-based, quality lessons but also apply culturally and linguistically responsive practices that will meet the needs of their diverse learners. Based on our recently completed research (Giouroukakis & Honigsfeld, 2010), we have generated an

ABC list of such practices that will aid all teachers of diverse learners in terms of preparing them for standards-based instruction and high-stakes testing:

Authentic Materials: Infuse authentic materials (e.g., songs, newspapers, video clips, and current events) in the core curriculum in order to make instruction more meaningful and more readily relatable to students' lives.

Background Knowledge: Activate students' background knowledge in order to help them connect new information to prior knowledge and thereby learn the material. If students' prior knowledge is limited, spend time on establishing a common frame of reference before a new topic is introduced.

Comprehensible Input: Use oral and written language that is understandable to students, which will enhance their learning.

Differentiation of Instruction: Vary your instructional strategies to address differences in students' language proficiency levels, academic readiness levels, and learning styles.

Empathy: Lower your students' anxiety by showing empathy and by being patient and reassuring. Help students overcome past failures and enhance their chances to tackle academically challenging material successfully.

Feed Forward: Consider offering "feed forward" rather than feedback when your students respond to written prompts by guiding them throughout the process and anticipating areas of special difficulties.

Guided Practice: Create ample opportunities for your students to rehearse their responses orally first (in pairs or in small groups) before putting them into writing.

Home-School Connection: Acknowledge and build on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that they bring from their home cultures.

Interpersonal Support: Learn as many key phrases as you can in your students' home languages, and offer your ongoing support through encouraging remarks both in English and the native language.

Joyful Learning: Create a learning environment which recognizes that second language acquisition as well as content attainment may be more successful when the teaching-learning process is more enjoyable (Udvari-Solner & Kluth, 2007).

Knowledge Construction: Provide frequent opportunities for students to construct their own understanding of new concepts.

Learning about Your Students: Find out about your students and their diverse needs as much as possible (e.g., cultural, linguistic, academic, learning styles) in order to better address them.

Multimodal Learning: Use multimodal aids (e.g., auditory, visual, digital) in the classroom as a way to address students' diverse learning styles and interests.

Native Language: Encourage your students to use their native language in and outside the classroom as a medium for learning English as well as content; use bilingual dictionaries and glossaries during lessons and test taking situations.

Opportunities for Interaction: Provide frequent opportunities for student interactions though pair or small group work to enhance oral language development.

Performance-Based Products: Allow students to show mastery of content through varied performance-based assessments, not just through multiple choice tests or test items that emulate standardized tests. In an English class, use drama, songs, and role-playing to engage students as they develop new skills and to assess their knowledge.

Questioning: Assign questions or have students generate their own questions that are higher-order and require deep and broad thinking.

Reflection: Assign tasks that require students to reflect on ideas, topics, and problems such as journal writing, generating questions, and reader-response, in order to develop students' metacognitive skills, which will assist in problem-solving.

Scaffolding: Systematically employ instructional scaffolding techniques throughout your lessons, including modeling, vocabulary building, sentence starters, paragraph and essay frames, and structured and graphic organizers in order to provide support.

Technology: Utilize technology as a tool to enhance your lessons, motivate students, and equip them with 21st century skills.

Understanding: Deepen the textual understanding of students by explicitly teaching them strategies, such as previewing, purpose-setting, and vocabulary teaching.

Vocabulary: Pre-teach and regularly review the essential vocabulary of content areas and of the testing directions (function verbs) in order to aid in text comprehension.

Wait Time: Give ELLs sufficient time to formulate their responses before calling on them to maximize their chances of responding successfully.

Xerox: Make copies of outlines, model responses, partially completed handouts, visual scaffolds and other supporting materials.

Yes: Say yes whenever possible. Think positively and transfer your enthusiasm for learning to your students.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): In the Vygotskian tradition, make sure ELLs have learning experiences within their ZPD (1978), by providing them with mentor texts and language models and by encouraging them to become self-directed, independent learners.

We believe that by applying culturally and linguistically responsive practices, teachers will address the unique needs of their diverse students and equip them with the 21st century skills necessary to succeed in school and the workforce as well as in life.

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