Chapter 6

Reaching Rigor for English Learners Through Responsive Interactions of Care

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores what happens when teacher-student and student-student interactions reflect a higher level of responsiveness to the human beings involved. It describes biography-driven instruction (BDI), a research-based method of instruction that supports all learners to reach high academic standards, while at the same time ensuring that English learners have the scaffolds and tools needed to engage fully in the curriculum. Teachers who implement BDI develop a holistic understanding of students’ sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions. They use students’ background knowledge as a springboard to new learning. To determine the impact of BDI on the education of English learners in elementary classrooms, this chapter explores the perspectives of 16 teachers (Grades 1-6) who received professional development on BDI and then implemented the method with their own communities of learners. Interview data was collected in Spring 2016, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed. Findings in the form of themes in participant voice are discussed throughout the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Elementary educators, district administrators, and policy makers across the country are looking for answers to the question: How do we best support English learners to achieve linguistic and academic success? New programs, curricula, apps, and strategies flood into districts each year, many promising a

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quick fix to the quandary. The results of these well-intended efforts often mean unsystematic actions on
the part of the teacher to make everything work for all learners. However, in this current climate with so
many variances in students’ background experiences and linguistic and academic levels, such teacher
efforts fall short and fail to fully utilize students’ individual assets for learning (National Education As-
sociation, 2011). Often in a rush to have learners complete tasks and finish assignments to keep up with
the pacing demands of the curriculum, teachers provide fewer opportunities for students to collaborate
in the classroom community as well as more limited access to the kinds of challenging questions and
tasks that spawn critical and creative thinking (Herrmann, 2015).

Our work with teachers and students in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) school settings
for nearly two decades has led to the development of practical ways for teachers to implement research
and theory surrounding second language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 1981; Cummins, 1981; Thomas
& Collier, 2012) and the tenets of culturally responsive education (e.g., Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings,
1995; Nieto, 2011). At the core of these efforts is the simple notion of human interactions of care, which
become central to instructional processes for teachers. In a world where many educators feel stretched
beyond their capacities due to job intensification and financial shortfalls, human relationships in the
classroom tend to take a back seat.

This chapter explores what happens when teacher–student and student–student interactions reflect
a higher level of responsiveness to the human beings involved. It describes a research-based method of
instruction that supports all learners to reach high academic standards, while at the same time ensur-
ing that English learners have the scaffolds and tools needed to engage fully in the curriculum. It also
highlights the results of a qualitative case study featuring 16 elementary teachers committed to taking
theory to practice in order to enhance their effectiveness with CLD learners.

BACKGROUND

Biography-driven instruction (Herrera, 2010, 2016) is a method of providing culturally responsive in-
struction grounded in a holistic understanding of the student. This “biography,” which evolved conceptu-
ally from the work of Thomas and Collier (e.g., Thomas & Collier, 1997), comprises the sociocultural,
linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions of the learner (Herrera, 2016; Herrera & Murry, 2016).
Although the dimensions are interrelated and attention to each is essential, the sociocultural dimension
is at the heart of the biography. This dimension grounds the life of the child and includes his or her home
dynamics and relationships as well as cultural experiences, values, and traditions. These in turn shape
the child’s ways of viewing and understanding the world and interacting with others.

The linguistic dimension of the CLD student biography asks teachers to go beyond simply under-
standing a child’s language from the perspective of proficiency levels in listening, speaking, reading,
and writing based on standardized tests in English (L2) and in the native language (L1). Instead, educa-
tors explore how students use both (or multiple) languages to comprehend, communicate, and express
themselves. Similarly, although considerations for students’ learning styles, learning strategies, and
processing—as typically defined in school settings—are not forgotten, teachers who maximize English
learners’ cognitive dimension attend to the specific ways they know, think, and apply in the context of
each lesson. Teachers who use the student biography as the foundation for their teaching also realize
that a student’s academic dimension cannot be understood simply by knowing his or her history with