

## Teaching Language Minority Students in Elementary Schools

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**C**REDE's Five Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning have been established by a thorough continuing analysis of research findings and the professional literature in the field of education and diversity. The five Standards are those recommendations on which the literature is in agreement, across all cultural, racial and linguistic groups in the United States, across all age levels, and all subject matters. Thus they express the principles of effective pedagogy for all students. Even for mainstream students, the Standards describe the ideal; but for students whose educational success is at risk due to factors like poverty or language differences, the Standards are vital.

In furthering the consensus process, the Standards have been presented to extensive national audiences, of varying sizes, constituencies, and venues, and in a variety of focus group participation structures, over a period of 5 years. The Standards reflect the consensus that persisted across those diverse discussions.

The Standards are expressed in theoretical language of the sociocultural perspective and are listed below.

- I. Joint Productive Activity: Teacher and Students Producing Together
- II. Language Development: Developing Language Across the Curriculum
- III. Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students' Lives
- IV. Cognitive Challenge: Teaching Complex Thinking
- V. Instructional Conversation: Teaching Through Conversation

While the Standards represent effective instructional practices for all students, this brief discussion focuses particularly on Language Development (Standard II) to illustrate how teachers can apply that standard in their instruction with English language learners. Because of pressures of covering content and curriculum, it is often difficult to plan for students' language development as well. For elementary school English language learners, regardless of program (e.g., transitional bilingual, sheltered content), there are some basic steps necessary for teachers to take to facilitate the students' language development:

- understand the language needs of students
- explicitly plan to meet those needs
- deliver instruction
- assess whether they comprehended it

We will consider a hypothetical student to describe each step.

### Understand students' language needs

Nora is 7 years old and she has just begun first grade in a regular classroom that includes several English language

learners. Nora has never been to school before and she is quite nervous because she does not know the other children and she does not speak English very well. Nora, her other family members, and friends all speak another language with one another. Except for some television in English, Nora has had little exposure to the language. Nora's parents are recent immigrants to the U.S.; they come from a rural community in Southeast Asia where they were subsistence farmers. Neither her mother nor father speaks English well and they do not read or write their own language.

Nora, like many other children with similar backgrounds, has a great deal to learn in school. She has to learn English so that she can play and interact with her other classmates and communicate effectively with the teachers and support staff. Some of Nora's classmates speak the same primary language as she does, but some speak other languages. Nora also has to learn the language skills she needs for her various subjects, like arithmetic, science, and social studies. This means she has to learn to read and write as well as use oral language for thinking, problem solving, explaining, and other academic purposes. These skills overlap with the kinds of language skills she needs for social communication, but at the same time they are different. The academic language skills she needs not only require specialized vocabulary associated with different subjects but also different rhetorical styles—the language of science is different from the language of mathematics, for example. Nora has to do all this at the same time as she tries to keep up with the rest of the curriculum.

### Plan lessons

Nora's teacher thinks about Nora's language needs and those of the other English language learners as she plans lessons for the class. The curriculum they are covering focuses on weather, specifically the relationship between sun, clouds, and rain. For today's lesson, Nora's teacher sets an objective about the subject matter, weather, and also sets a language development objective. By thinking through and writing down both the content and language objectives, the teacher is more likely to embed language development successfully into a content-based lesson. The weather objective is that students will be able to draw the following processes correctly: clouds producing rain, rain-forming puddles, the sun drying up the puddles, and evaporating water forming new clouds. The language objective is that students will be able to identify key vocabulary words orally when shown a picture or representative hand gesture. Students will retell the water cycle aloud using simple sentences.

## Deliver instruction

**Presentation:** Since Nora and many of her classmates are at the early stages of learning English, the teacher has to find ways to negotiate the meaning of the new concepts and language that she is going to present to Nora and her classmates in the weather lesson. She uses a Big Book that tells the story of the weather cycle, including visuals of rain falling from clouds and forming puddles, the sun drying up the rain, and evaporating water forming new clouds. Under each picture there are short sentences describing the picture. As Nora's teacher reads, she tracks the text with her finger, and points to the picture of clouds when she reads the word *cloud*. She does the same for *rain*, *sun*, and *evaporation*. After reading the book, Nora's teacher shows the students a hand gesture for *sun*, *clouds*, *rain*, *puddles*, and *puddles of rainwater drying and evaporating*. Together they practice each gesture and say aloud the appropriate word for each one. Then following the teacher's movements, the students use hand gestures to demonstrate the weather cycle depicted in the big book and recite with the teacher simple lines excerpted from the story: *The clouds make the rain, and the rain makes the puddles, and the sun dries the puddles, and evaporation makes the clouds.*

**Guided Practice:** Nora's teacher again uses the Big Book for guided practice with the new vocabulary. She calls on individual students to mime or say the word of the specific weather element she points to in each picture. If a student chooses to mime, she then asks another to identify the term, and vice-versa. The teacher moves at a brisk pace going from one weather vocabulary term to the next but revisiting each term several times in order to give each student a chance to respond with the correct word and mime: "Nora, what is this? Tony, show us how it looks. Daniel, what is this? Ana, tell us the word." Next the class practices saying the simple lines from the story aloud. Students read these chorally while looking at pictures in the book. Several students volunteer to say one line individually.

**Application:** As a follow-up activity, Nora's teacher gives each student a large sheet of paper with four rectangles side-by-side. Each rectangle contains a simple sentence: *The clouds make the rain. The rain makes the puddles. The sun dries the puddles. Evaporation makes the clouds.* Giving directions, Nora's teacher points to each box, reads the sentence, mimes the process described in the title, and tells students to draw a picture that shows how it looks. As students work on their pictures the teacher circulates, clarifying directions, assisting as needed, and spending time with students who need additional explanations of the weather cycle, opportunities

to practice naming the weather elements, or reading the sentences aloud.

## Assess results

Nora's teacher identifies three settings to assess the lesson objectives: during the guided practice portion of the lesson when the teacher was calling on students to name and mime the elements and to restate the cycle in simple sentences; during the application activity while the students were drawing the weather cycle; and in a follow-up one-on-one conference as students turned in their drawing assignments. During the conference, to assess her content objective, Nora's teacher checks that students have correctly drawn each of the four processes in the weather cycle. To assess the language development objective the teacher points to the depiction of each weather element in the student's drawings and ask students to say the name and mime it: "What is this? Show me how it looks." She also asks students what those four drawings show us about weather to see if students can retell the water cycle of each using the simple sentences or using their own words.

As you can see from this lesson, the teacher makes a conscious effort to achieve both the language and content objectives she planned for the students. By using visuals (Big Book pictures, written clues, drawings), presenting information clearly, demonstrating learning strategies (tracking the text with a finger), adding a kinesthetic element (gesture for each word), and practicing oral language (saying the words, reading aloud simple lines from the book), the teacher makes the new information comprehensible for Nora and the other students learning English. The teacher's focus on the language development needs of the students allows English language learners to have access to grade-level content material—a critical issue for these students and one of CREDE's standards. If you would like to know more about the practices suggested in this paper, consult the references listed below.

## References

- Tharp, R. G. (1997). *From at-risk to excellence: Research, theory, and principles for practice* (Research Rep. No. 1). Washington, DC and Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.
- Dalton, S. (1998). *Pedagogy matters: Standards for effective teaching practice* (Research Rep. No. 4). Washington, DC and Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.

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