

On the Brink of At-Risk: An English Language Learner in a Kindergarten Classroom

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Introduction

I first met Jose on the day before school officially started, at the open house/ meet the teacher time provided by the school. Students, with my help, the help of the paraeducator, or the help of older siblings, were supposed to find classroom areas and items like the reading center, the trash can, cubbies, and so on. When I asked Jose to look around and see if he could spot a place with lots and lots of books, he just looked at me with a big smile but no comprehension when I asked him. Steven, a bilingual student, translated my request into Spanish, and Jose immediately turned and ran toward the reading center speaking excitedly in Spanish. It was obvious to me from that point that Jose was a bright young student, but one that was going to need extra support to be fully involved in classroom activities and lessons.

Background Information

Jose is 5 years old, speaks fluent Spanish and some English, and loves to play with technology, especially the computer and the SMARTBoard. He attended Carver last year in the half-day Pre-K 4 class, and received ESOL services during the year. He continues to receive ESOL services this year, and currently is pulled from morning whole-group literacy and writing instruction for half an hour twice a week, with two other Spanish-speaking students from the class. He has an older brother at Carver who is currently in second grade; his brother received ESOL support from his Pre-K 4 year through the end of first grade. Jose has lived in the area for at least three full years. His mother required the services of an interpreter at the open house to translate paperwork and communicate with the teacher, and she identified Spanish as the only language spoken at home. He appears very shy around adults, and only responds with nods, gestures, and occasionally one- or two-word answers to questions directly at him in either

English or Spanish. During playtime on the playground or zones, however, he speaks fluently and happily with his peers in Spanish and will occasionally use English words and phrases.

Observation

Jose learns in a regular classroom with all of the kindergarten students receiving ESOL services; this was a choice made intentionally by the school. In addition to Jose and the two other Latino boys receiving ESOL services, the class has four other Latino, Spanish-speaking students who are bilingual. The rest of the students are majority African American or mixed race. Jose is good friends and spends most of his free time hanging out with two Latino boys, one who is also receiving ESOL services and one who is bilingual. The classroom environment is a generally supportive place, and the teacher allows students to translate for other students if necessary, though she does not use this frequently. All of the students seem to be generally accepting of each other, and of the limitations and special talents each student has.

From what I have seen and heard from students, parents, and teachers at Carver, there is a strong sense of community among the Latino population around the school. The mother of one of our other students self-identified as the liaison between the Latino community in which she and almost all of our Latino students, including Jose, live. She volunteers in the school and helped some of our other Spanish-speaking parents fill out the forms during open house. This strong sense of community is certainly beneficial to Jose and other students like him because he has access to a bilingual support system at or near his home as well as at school.

A visitor to the classroom might look at Jose's behavior and contributions and think that he is bilingual. He carefully follows classroom procedures and is able to understand enough English to correctly follow most of the teacher's instructions. He can write his name, though he usually uses his toolbox nametag for reference. In most discussions, especially in the whole

group setting, he can provide an appropriate one- or two-word response to a question asked, particularly if a few other people have answered before him. In class, we have gone over six lower-case letters; Jose is able to remember, verbalize, write, and match each letter to the corresponding word and sound. He also knows a few other letters, mostly the ones in his first name. He can consistently count accurately from one to fifteen, then up to thirty with a few mistakes, mix-ups, and hesitations. By almost all informal testing we have conducted, Jose is on par with many of his English-speaking classmates, especially those who did not attend Pre-K.

Literature Analysis

Based on the chart of the five stages of second language acquisition presented in Hill and Flynn (2008), which is based on Krashen and Terrell (1983), Jose is probably in the early production stage, moving toward the speech emergence stage. He has limited to good comprehension, typically produces few word or short phrase answers, and makes errors in grammar and pronunciation, all of which are characteristics of early production bordering on speech emergence (p. 47). In my observations, I noticed that Jose speaks English more fluently and with a more diverse vocabulary with his peers than he does with the teacher in any setting. Cummins (1999) postulated that second language learners, specifically immigrant children learning a new language, usually develop Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) at a faster rate than they develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cummins also stated that immigrant children usually need about five years to catch up to their English-speaking peers' CALP. At this point in his educational career, Jose is not far behind his peers in CALP development because his peers do not have very advanced CALP themselves; however, his acquisition of CALP is hampered by his lack of BICS fluency.

The school environment in which Jose must catch up to his peers in language while not falling behind in CALP development plays an important part in his educational experience and success as well. Johnson, Muilenburg, Arnett, & Stover (2011) described the current pedagogy of the American public school system in which those with power continue to withhold power from the already powerless minority, including ELLs. This symbolic violence, the authors explained, manifests itself in the educational experience of ELLs in the weakness and brevity of ESOL services provided to them, and the lack of teacher preparation for supporting ELLs. Echevarria (2006) corroborated this idea; she explained that the No Child Left Behind Act requires that there be highly qualified teachers in every classroom, but that there is a nationwide shortage of qualified ESL teachers. Learners like Jose face both the daunting challenge of learning a new language while learning content in that new language and negotiating in a system where they have no power and are systematically denied power through the norms of the school system.

Recommendations

At this moment in his educational career, Jose is an at-risk student because he is not yet fluent in English yet is expected to participate in class and complete assignments that are given and explained in English. Since he is so young, however, and is not too far behind his peers in the development of content knowledge and academic language in English, he does not need to remain an at-risk student. There are many different tactics to address Jose's situation and handle the challenges he faces in order to ameliorate his educational experience. Jose cannot be expected to succeed on his own in a system which both deprives him of power and denies him the extra support he needs to stay on par with his peers and work to his full potential.

The county system and the school can best help Jose by altering, increasing, and elongating his ESOL services. First, Jose's current ESOL services should be conducted either in the classroom, where Jose is engaged in the same work as his peers with extra support from the ESOL teacher, or at least conducted with the materials and topics from class, if the ESOL teacher determines that pulling Jose and the other students receiving ESOL services is the most beneficial model. The repeated or supported exposure to the content and content language will help Jose develop CALP while he also develops BICS. As Cummins (1999) described, an immigrant student typically takes longer to develop CALP than he or she does to develop BICS. In an American school context, this language development disparity becomes problematic when schools reduced or completely removed support for English Language Learners (ELL) at the point when an individual ELL becomes fluent or almost fluent in BICS. By the point that he achieves BICS fluency, Jose may still need support to catch up to his peers in CALP, particularly if he does not acquire the same CALP language as his peers as they learn throughout the school year. Language learners typically reach BICS fluency after around six years of language study; the rate of language development levels off at the point BICS fluency is achieved. CALP, however, continues to develop at roughly the same rate through a language learner's lifetime (Cummins, 1999). For Jose, this means that he will probably be left on his own to both catch up with his peers in CALP development and learn new CALP with them as he progresses through higher grades. Ideally, the county and school should continue to provide Jose with ESOL support services for several more years, perhaps decreasing the time as he catches up with his peers in CALP development. Before removing services, however, the school should ensure that Jose is equipped to successfully develop CALP without the extra support. Furthermore, the school, the county, and the entire nation should prioritize teacher training facilitating more

successful interactions with minority students and effective classroom strategies to work with ELLs and former ELLs. These recommendations address, at the school, county, and country level, the symbolic violence toward minority students and the lack of teacher preparation highlighted by Johnson et al. (2011). Though these larger issues directly influence the experience of ELLs in the classroom, individual classroom teachers, with sufficient preparation and knowledge, can implement strategies to help ELLs learn both the language and the content despite the limitations and challenges imposed upon the student by the larger education system.

The classroom teachers has already begun to implement some procedures and resources for Jose and the two other ELLs in the class to use to support both their language development and their engagement with the content material; in addition to these procedures, the teacher can also use the information provided by Hill and Flynn (2008) to ask lower and higher order thinking questions that the students can answer despite their limited English fluency. At the point at which I left my placement in Jose's class, the teacher was in the process of preparing picture cards to help the ELLs (and some other students) comprehend instructions and follow directions. She would state the directions and use the cards simultaneously, helping students create the connection between the object pictured and the English word for that object. To further help Jose and the other ELLs in the class, the teacher should continue to create those cards for whatever she can, providing as much visual aid as possible. The teacher can also use the chart synthesized by Hill and Flynn to ask language-skill-appropriate questions that also promote diverse and higher-order thinking. For Jose, who exhibits traits primarily from the early production stage, the teacher should ask questions that require yes/no, either/or, and who, what, how many questions. In content area with which Jose seems comfortable and able to express his ideas in English, the teacher can use why, how, explain... questions (Hill and Flynn, 2008, p.

47). With some extra planning, the teacher can develop higher order thinking questions that Jose can answer.

Conclusion

As such a young ELL who has lived in the country for a few years and has been receiving ESOL support for a year already, Jose is not locked into his status as at-risk learner. If his classroom teachers over the course of his elementary school experience continue to support him as he develops BICS and CALP, Jose could very likely continue to learn English without falling behind his peers in content knowledge. Without the support from his teachers and the ESOL teacher, however, Jose could fall behind his peers and continue to fall further behind in the development of his CALP because of his limited English fluency. He is on the brink of being at-risk, and the support he receives in the next few years could pull him to the safety of becoming a successful bilingual student or push him into the at-risk designation of an struggling ELL.

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