Empowering Effective Literacy Instructions for Multi-Cultural English Language Learners

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Enhancing authentic instructional strategies remains as an important issue to improve English language learners’ literacy achievements. The research shows that literacy instruction often pay less attention to the cultural content of the reading texts and the cultural match between diverse students’ home culture and the school culture. This study proposed the significance of using cooperative learning, culturally responsive materials, and multi-cultural literacy instructional strategies to support the development of English language learners’ language proficiency and content knowledge with high-level of integrity and cultural recognition.

Keywords: multi-cultural literacy instruction, culturally responsive teaching, literacy education, teaching English to speakers of other languages

Introduction

Allington and Johnston (2002) indicated the issue that today, there is much emphasis on “effective” schools and “effective” teachers with “effectiveness” defined primarily by student performance on group administered standardized achievement tests (p. 10). According to Allington and Johnston’s (2002) research, the teaching effectiveness in literacy instruction is typically connected and evaluated based on student’s achievement test scores, which could provide the direct and comparable data to examine teachers’ instructional outcomes.

As Darling-Hammond (1999) had demonstrated, the quality of teaching force is a much more powerful predictor of student achievements than other factors, such as student demographic characteristics and measures of school resources. Therefore, the questions would be raised from this statement:

1. How can we define effective literacy teaching and who define the standard of “good teaching” based on what purposes?
2. Will the traditionally test-oriented evaluation of teaching quality be effective in multi-cultural classroom sittings?

Allington and Johnston (2002) provided multiple perspectives on defining effective literacy instruction. For policy-makers and researchers who have more often focused on that final characteristic in defining good teaching as indicated by achievement tests. While for school administrators and parents who place the development of academic proficiencies in children as a primary purpose of schooling, so does society (Allington & Johnston, 2002). Thus, effective teachers are more often defined as those teachers who generate larger than average test score gains from their students (Allington & Johnston, 2002, p. 12). While much attention has been paid to
teaching effectiveness to test scores, teachers will encounter challenge to educate all children well and promote thoughtful literacy along with develop basic literacy (Allington & Johnston, 2002).

Educating students to develop higher-order literacy proficiencies along with maintaining their basic literacy skills needs teachers to redefine the concept of effective literacy instruction and reconsider teaching capacity to meet needs from students with diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) indicated that it has been repeatedly established that the best instruction results when combinations of methods are orchestrated by a teacher who decides what to do in light of children’s needs (p. 1). It is essential for teachers to obtain a firm understanding of how students learn and types of pedagogical knowledge and skills can be used to tap into students’ prior knowledge in ways that will evoke their interest in learning, increase their levels of engagement, and encourage them to feel a part of the learning process (Howard, 2010).

As Garrison (1997) argued, “Good teaching requires teachers doing the right thing in the right way and at the right time in response to problems posed by particular people in particular places on particular occasions” (p. 271). Hence, the concept of literacy instruction effectiveness lies not with a single program or method, rather, with a teacher who thoughtfully and analytically integrates various programs, materials, and methods as the situation demands (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999).

Effective Teaching Practices in Reading Instruction

Teachers’ Roles in Class

Given the changing standards that effectiveness in literacy instruction is now being evaluated, reflections on how to situating teaching strategies into diverse learning contexts are essential. Notions of modifying teachers’ roles and pedagogies to assist students in accomplishing academic achievements are equally important. All reading instructional strategies must be viewed in context and be adjusted to the particular needs of students (Pritchard & O’Hara, 2008, p. 637). Duffy and Hoffman (1999) stated following roles effective teachers act in class:

1. Effective teachers are elective. They impose harmony on classroom environments by cutting across multiple lines, combining methodological techniques, and adapting programs and materials to the particular needs of students. The most effective teachers can be both highly explicit and less explicit, based on the instructional situation;

2. They are also adaptive, which can integrate new with old in unique ways;

3. Effective teachers themselves are also aware of the eclectic nature of good teaching. Effective literacy teachers understand that different students require different methods at different time.

As Au (2006) indicated that effective reading teachers act as models in class, who can inspire students’ higher-level thinking by providing monitoring comprehension, explicit explanation, and using guided instructional practices in classes. They can read students’ need and diversify instructional methods depend on the context of learning.

Teachers’ Instructional Methods and Materials Choosing

Effective literacy instructions share common characteristics. Drawing on Allington and Johnston’s (2002) researches on effective Grade 4 teaching, the core of effective reading instruction focused on the development of students’ thoughtful literacy attainment. As they report, the more effective teachers in literacy classes are
characterized as:

Providing explicit instruction, using behavioral routines, challenging and involving students, creating a supportive, encouraging, and friendly classroom climate, engaging in lots of constructive teacher-student exchanges, offering a variety of reading materials, scheduling frequent library visits, crafting stimulating curricular activities, asking many inferential questions, and displaying student work prominently. (p. 20)

Pressley et al. (2001, p. 36) presented findings of effective reading instruction, which share similar characteristics in terms of using effective instruction methods, which fit students’ learning styles and evoke meaningful learning performances as the following:

1. Teachers do many things to support and encourage the literacy development of their students;
2. Use themes and attempting to connect their literacy instruction to content-area instruction;
3. Skills were taught in the context of real reading and writing;
4. Teachers make literacy and literacy instruction motivating.

Consistent with these effective instructional ways, Knapp (1995) presented what effective reading instructions could do to create a “high achieving” and “meaning-emphasis” classroom which was characterized by maximal opportunity to read, reading and writing integrated with other subject areas, a focus on the ways of constructing meaning, and provide opportunity to discuss what was read in class (Knapp, 1995, as cited in Allington & Johnston, 2002, p. 21). Commonalities across the most effective and intellectual stimulating classrooms are also reported in Pressley et al.’s (2001) study. In those classrooms, skills are explicitly taught with literature emphasis. There are much reading and writing for students and assessments match to students’ competence, so that students’ self-regulations are encouraged. Moreover, effective reading teachers have excellent classroom management.

Effective reading classrooms share the similar positive climate and cooperative atmosphere, which contain positive feedback from teachers and act as the risk-free (Pressley et al., 2001), caring, and respectful learning environment (Allington & Johnston, 2002). In this challenging but non-threatening learning environment, effective teachers not only promote students’ motivations, but also create a literate classroom community, in which they create numerous opportunities for students and emphasize the value of supporting the literacy development of others (Au, 2006, p. 87).

In addition of practical instruction methods and building effective learning environment, Pressley et al. (1998) identified how the materials and methods used in teaching reading contributed to effective literacy instruction based on their research of Grade 4 and 5 literacy classrooms. They proposed following features of effective material choosing and alternative instructional activities which benefited to students’ literacy learning processes:

Use of diverse grouping patterns, including small group lessons and one-to-one conferences, teaching of both higher- and lower- order-level skills, focus on vocabulary development, use of diverse curriculum materials, with an emphasis on narrative literature, frequent use of collaborative learning activities, focus on developing student independence, and integrated literacy and content area instruction. (Pressley et al., 1998, as cited in Allington & Johnston, 2002, p. 21)

**Teachers’ Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Students**

Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs play an important role in students’ learning and teacher-student relationships building. As Peregoy and Boyle (2012) addressed that as teachers begin to learn more about their students, they will be better able to offer them social and emotional support to meet their needs in their growth
in literacy learning processes and academic abilities. Landson-Billings (1994) summarized characteristics as typifying effective teachers as:

Believe all children can succeed, see teaching as “pulling knowledge out” versus putting it in, view knowledge critically, as continually recreated and shared, facilitate fluid teacher-student relationships that are equitable, demonstrate connectedness with all students, encourage students to learn collaboratively, help students develop necessary skills, and seek excellence but take individual differences into account. (as cited in Allington & Johnston, 2002, p. 22)

Those shared effective teaching attitudes not only encourage students’ motivations to learn, but also enable teachers to modify their teaching strategies in order to effectively and respectfully communicate and interact with students.

**Developing Effective Reading Instruction for Multi-Cultural Students**

**Cultural Impacts on Minority Students’ Learning and Reading Instruction**

Working effectively with students from diverse cultures presents challenges for teachers. As Peregoy and Boyle (2012) claimed that teachers and students bring to the classroom particular cultural orientations that affect how they perceive and interact with each other in the classroom. While teachers have students whose languages and cultures differ from their own, they need to learn about students and their cultures, while at the same time, reflecting on their own culturally rooted teaching perspectives and behaviors that may facilitate or interfere with teaching and learning (Peregoy & Boyle, 2012). To achieve this goal, teachers need to acquire basic aspects of culture in the classroom as a starting point for reconsidering teaching effectiveness in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Au (2006) presented two dimensions of culture: One is defined as long-lasting values, beliefs, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation, which also refers to as the “vertical dimension of culture.” The other dimension of culture is defined as the “horizontal dimension of culture” which as involving dynamic processes of changes (p. 9). As Au (2006) indicated in her study, while students from diverse cultural backgrounds are adjusting to new cultural and linguistic environment, those students may change their cultural values and practices to fit in the new environment. Thus, process may lead to a cultural break and learning gap in their learning processes.

Focusing on home-school mismatch, some linguists (Minami & Ovando, 2004) had indicated that language-minority students do not prosper academically in such contexts, because the discursive practices of their homes do not match the discursive practices of the school environment, where European American middle-class teachers with very limited multi-cultural and multi-lingual competencies and experiences are the majority (Minami & Ovando, 2004, p. 568). This mismatch tends to limit language-minority students’ access to and participation in higher educational and occupational opportunities (Minami & Ovando, 2004). In other words, students from non-English and non-standard English speaking communities are more likely to be disadvantaged and marginalized in the mainstream learning environments. Teachers must be aware that the vertical and horizontal dimensions of culture are simultaneously at work in the classroom (Au, 2006, p. 9). Thus, teachers need to modify teaching attitudes and strategies to value and connect the values and experiences students bring from their home and own cultural heritages.

Factors of cultural impacts on students’ learning and teachers’ teaching are also mentioned by Dilg (2003) in her study of cross-cultural teaching and learning. Mentioning challenges both White teachers and teachers of
color are facing in meeting the needs of the students in multi-cultural classroom, she addressed the issue that very few teachers feel they are well-qualified to teach in today’s classroom with students from diverse backgrounds. Deploiring the face that current United States (U.S.) teachers are not well-prepared to work effectively in such diverse schooling contexts, Minami and Ovando (2004) urged teachers to learn something about their students’ cultural background in order to make them understand and teach in a culturally responsive way. As they pointed out with increased immigration, the number of second- and third-generation Latino and Asian Americans in particular, who want to maintain the language of their forebears is also increasing. Absent this factor, maintenance of heritage languages might not be successful. Accordingly, teachers need to modify classroom discourse patterns, interactional patterns, and instructional methods in order to acknowledge the cultural and linguistic diversities among students and situate language instruction into multi-cultural context.

Au (2006) provided two approaches to illustrate how culture applies to teachers and students in literacy classes: the culture of teachers and the culture of the school. As she argued that the majority of teachers are from mainstream backgrounds with European American ethnicity, mono-lingual speakers of standard American English and mainly from middle-income families. The situation in which students of diverse backgrounds are taught by teachers of mainstream backgrounds may cause teachers to misinterpret students’ behavior, resulting in misunderstandings and problems with classroom management and students’ learning outcomes.

The concept of culture applies to schools as well. Au (2006) reviewed the issue of the typical patterns of Western schooling. She pointed out that a typical schooling pattern is to focus the instruction of students of diverse backgrounds mainly on lower-level skills as opposed to higher-level thinking, along with centering the reading curriculum primarily on books written by authors with a mainstream perspective (Diamond & Moore, 1995, as cited in Au, 2006, p. 11). Meanwhile, tests are used to test students’ literacy proficiencies are based on state standards (Au, 2006). Previous researches of cultural impacts on literacy achievements reflect the problematic issue in current literacy instruction: The teaching force, patterns of schooling, and academic literacy standards and assessments are lacking of cultural awareness, which contribute to the poor literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds.

The growing diversity in students’ population and the expanding literacy achievement gap between ethnic minority students and their White counterparts evoke teachers’ reconsiderations of embedding cultural diversity into instruction to reduce the gap and promote teaching effectiveness for students from every cultural and ethnic group. In considering the empowerment of language-minority students, teachers need take into account differences in minority students’ learning styles and how to develop the effective teaching strategies to facilitate their learning in the mainstream academic environment. Advocating for improving minority students’ literacy achievements, researchers present the call for applying multi-cultural literacy instruction for ethnic minority students (Hiebert, 1991; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Au, 2006, 2011).

Connections Between Minority Students’ Culture and Academic Achievements

Researchers suggest that there is a link between culture and achievement emphasize that improvement in learning, including basic skills, can be expected when instruction is compatible with natal-culture patterns (Diamond & Moore, 1995, p. 7). In reading instruction in particular, students’ life experiences and cultural background influence the degree of comprehension and memory they achieve (Diamond & Moore, 1995). The essence of ethnic minority students’ prior experience and culture, their ways of interacting, communicating, learning, and performing combine to form their initial understanding and expectations of learning in the
Eurocentric culture and English dominant classrooms and succeeding in reading in a language which is different from their mother tongue. In the process of learning in the mainstream classrooms, students from multi-cultural backgrounds should not be condemned for the language or culture they learn at home, rather they should be encouraged to retain these heritages (Sleet et al., 1988). Researchers further claim that to facilitate literacy learning for these students, instruction needs to be compatible with and emerge from their culture, their traditions, and their heritage (Diamond & Moore, 1995, p. 8).

**Teachers’ Roles in Multi-Cultural Literacy Classrooms**

Similar as effective teachers’ roles in reading instruction to students from the majority ethnic group, teachers in multi-cultural literacy classrooms act as a model who can be aware of the dynamic nature of effective teaching and diversify teaching strategies based on students’ learning abilities and needs. The cultural and linguistic diversity enable teachers who work in multi-cultural classrooms to become what Diamond and Moore (1995) referred as a cultural mediator, cultural organizer, and orchestrators of social contexts (p. 35).

The social organization and diversity of the classroom make the teachers’ role change from that of the keeper of knowledge and the deliverer of knowledge to a role who can facilitate students’ acquisition of knowledge, enable them to take ownership of their learning (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Teachers’ roles, therefore, become more challenging:

1. Cultural organizers who facilitate strategic ways of accomplishing tasks so that the learning process involves varied ways of knowing, experiencing, thinking, and behaving;
2. Cultural mediators who create opportunities for critical dialogue and expression among all students as they pursue knowledge and understanding;
3. Orchestrators of social contexts who provide several learning configurations that include interpersonal and intrapersonal opportunities for seeking, accessing, and evaluating knowledge (Diamond & Moore, 1995, p. 35).

Thus, the teachers’ roles have special significances in a multi-cultural classroom, in where teachers create a community of learners who celebrate and affirm diversity and work toward cross-cultural understanding. In order to increase teaching effectiveness for ethnic minority students, teachers need to teach with what Jackie Irvine (2003) referred to as “the cultural eye,” wherein teachers view their world and the work that they do through a culture lens that allows them to be charge agents in the academic performance of culturally diverse students (Howard & Aleman, 2008).

**Promoting Cultural Understandings and Knowledge Base**

Researchers have indicated that most literacy teachers today are now aware of the need to think about and design reading instruction that incorporates the diverse population of students they are teaching and the need to use materials and practices that are sensitive to the students’ backgrounds (Diamond & Moore, 1995). During teachers’ processes of developing cultural awareness to reduce cultural deficit assumptions towards minority students, Diamond and Moore (1995) argued that it is equally important for teachers gain cultural knowledge about their students. They presented following strategies to assist teachers in building this knowledge based on their interviews and observations on effective multi-cultural reading classes:

1. Helping students develop an understanding of self;
2. Making differences visible;
3. Expanding the circle of cultural understanding by connecting to students’ families and communities;
4. Understanding traditional cultural values; using stories to life to share the cultural tradition;
5. Promoting understanding through cultural comparisons;
6. Appreciations of culture through poetry, music, and art;
7. Understanding and addressing social issues.

By examine and redefining teachers’ positions in multi-cultural literacy classrooms, researchers propose the call for developing teachers’ cultural understanding by building their own knowledge base and self-reflection on cultural diversity and differences between school culture and students’ culture. Acquiring knowledge base and transforming conventional teachers’ role as knowledge keepers and delivers enable teachers to assist minority students receive authentic knowledge base through learning in meaningful and engaging ways.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

A growing number of scholars have posited that effective teaching practices must recognize and respect cultural differences in their classrooms (Gay, 2000; Howard & Aleman, 2008; Au, 2011). Au (2006) addressed issues of how teachers can effectively respond to the increasing diversity among student population in order to enhance their literacy teaching effectiveness by implying culturally responsive literacy instruction. Au (2006) highlighted the following key features of culturally responsive literacy instruction as:

1. Culturally responsive instruction resides firmly within a pluralist vision of society;
2. It aims at school success for students of diverse backgrounds, acknowledging that a disproportionate number of these students typically experiences failure in school;
3. To improve the school success of students of diverse backgrounds, culturally responsive instruction seeks to build bridges between students’ experiences at home and at school, which is related to Moll’s (2006) (as cited in Au, 2006) concepts of funds of knowledge;
4. Culturally responsive instruction supports students in building, maintaining their competence in the home culture and language.

Garcia (2005) proposed four approaches to teaching for cultural literacy:

1. A contributions approach includes teachers’ use of reading books, stories, and articles about various cultures;
2. An additive approach focuses on integrating minority students’ cultural backgrounds and values into the regular curriculum;
3. A transformative approach intends to modify the basic curriculum to address the missing voice of cultural heritages from minority groups;
4. A decision-making and social action approach concentrates on developing students’ higher-order thinking and literacy skills.

Taken in this order, these approaches represent a hierarchy for infusing diverse cultural content into teaching practice to improve minority students’ literacy achievements.

Implementing culturally responsive instruction should involve making students’ home or heritage cultures central to the literacy curriculum. The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds could be improved by educators establish students’ ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum (Au, 2011, p. 41). Au (2006) carried out three practical approaches to accomplish this goal:

1. Teachers need to develop units focused on the history, traditions, customs, and beliefs of particular cultural groups;
2. For the teacher to invite parents or other community members to bring culturally relevant content into the classroom;
3. Making culturally relevant content central to the curriculum may be teachers involve students in projects that encourage them to bring aspects of their culture into the classroom.

Using culturally responsive literatures can not only evoke minority students’ motivation of reading, but also contribute to their building of self-esteem and the creation of an environment for communicative competence. Providing a variety of opportunities and materials for students to share and read stories aloud, thus heighten students’ interest in reading and their reading comprehension increases (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989, as cited in Diamond & Moore, 1995, p. 92).

As Au (2006) claimed that effective skill instruction for students of diverse backgrounds is based on giving students the opportunity to study the parts of reading and writing. She argued that skill instruction is highly important for students of diverse backgrounds, because they must master what Delpit (1995) (as cited in Au, 2006) called the codes of the culture of power or the secondary discourse of the school and mainstream society. Hence, Au (2006) offered four guidelines for making skill instruction highly beneficial to students of diverse backgrounds:

1. Skills should be taught in a meaningful context, so that students see the point of learning skills and are motivated to do so;
2. Instruction should be provided to address all three stages of word identification development, avoiding an imbalance in which students receive extensive instruction in phonics but little or no instruction directed toward building awareness and automaticity;
3. Skills should be taught in a well-organized, integrated manner that both strengthen students’ understandings and leave time for instruction in comprehension strategies and higher-level thinking;
4. Skill instruction should follow a six-step process that leads to the gradual release of responsibility, including teacher cueing to promote the application of skills across a wide variety of tasks and texts.

**Conclusions**

Previous studies summarize the major difference in teaching reading comprehension for ethnic minority students compared with their White peers: embedding multiple cultural lenses in teacher attitudes, reading materials, teaching strategies, and academic learning environment. Diamond and Moore’s (1995) study proposed the importance of selecting multi-cultural literatures for minority students to create meaning through reading experiences. Esenhart and Cutts-Dougherty (1991) addressed the significance of placing reading instruction in minority students’ familiar contexts in terms of creating culturally familiar and comfortable classroom in their study in 1991.

As Pritchard and O’Hara (2008) argued that the current literacy community must begin to understand the complexities of reading in languages other than English as well as the complexities of learning to read in the dominant language taught in schools when another language exists in student’s cognition. Reading instruction need to transform from the deficit view of considering non-English-speaking children’s existing language as meaningless (Miramontes & Commins, 1991) to accommodate minority students’ multiple levels of learning and interaction with teachers and their White counterparts in class (McCollum, 1991). As Au (2011) highlighted that the school literacy learning and achievements of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved as the following:
1. Teachers recognize the importance of students’ home languages and come to see biliteracy as an attainable and desirable outcome;
2. Teachers become culturally responsive in their management of classrooms and interactions with students;
3. Teachers make stronger links to the community;
4. Teachers provide students with both authentic reading activities and a considerable amount of instruction in the specific literacy skills needed for full participation in the culture of power.

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