Gaining Insights from Teachers: Recommendations of Effective Strategies for Improving SLL Reading of Content-Based Texts

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Abstract

Classroom teachers must gain more knowledge about effective instructional approaches to help second language learners (SLL) read for academic purposes. This article shares the ideas of pre-service and in-service teachers in the US about effective strategies for SLL.

บทคัดย่อ

ครูผู้สอนจำเป็นต้องมีความรู้เกี่ยวกับแนวทางการสอนอ่านที่มีประสิทธิภาพเพื่อส่งเสริมผู้เรียนภาษาที่สองให้สามารถอ่านงานเขียนเชิงวิชาการได้เป็นอย่างดี ผู้เขียนบทความนี้มุ่งเสนอแนวคิดของครูก่อนประจำการและครูประจำการในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา เกี่ยวกับเทคนิควิธีการสอนอ่านที่เหมาะสมและให้ประสิทธิผลสำหรับผู้เรียนภาษาที่สอง

In order to increase their ability to learn academic content, second language learners (SLLs) are encouraged to have plenty of opportunities to read meaningful materials. Reading meaningful and purposeful texts fosters risk taking by second language (L2) readers that helps them in constructing meaning from texts (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Blanton, 1992; Reyes & Molner, 1991). Even though SLLs may possess well-developed basic communicative language skills (Cummins, 1979; Chamot & O'Malley, 1992), they still are likely to face difficulties in reading for academic purposes with content area textbooks (Stetson & Williams, 1992). It is often the case that there is considerable difference between the less formal or social communication skills SLLs possess and how they cope in more structured, formal situations in school (Hadaway & Young, 1994; Crandall, 1995). In content subject matter, SLLs are required to learn from lengthy, conceptually dense prose in textbooks. Concentration, memory, critical thinking, and study planning skills are required. Second language learners often find that the cognitive demands of processing information during academic task can be overwhelming (Shih, 1992). Unfortunately research information on the exact nature of reading in English for SLLs is limited (Garcia, 2000; Bernhardt, 2000).

In a survey of SLLs, students at all levels—elementary, secondary, and college-cited difficulty reading and studying content area texts as a major problem (Christison & Krahnke, 1986; Smoke, 1988). In addition to the difficulties encountered by SLLs when they read the content area subjects, teachers themselves may feel insecure about teaching SLLs to read in English (Early, 1990; Grant, 1995). Often both in-service and pre-service teachers have not received adequate training for teaching SLLs. Hamayan (1990) reported that while nearly half of all public school teachers in the United States in 1980 either had language minority students in their classes or had taught them, only 1 in

17 had taken courses in teaching second language students. More recently, a content analysis of reading methods textbooks and professional journals conducted by Bernhardt (1994) indicated that teachers were not well prepared to deal with SLLs. It is often the case that teachers of elementary and secondary children, even taking into consideration the availability of professional journals, have limited access to meaningful information about best practices for SLLs (Garcia, 2000; Bernhardt, 2000). Grant and Wong (2003) also raised their concern that preparation of literacy practitioners is one of the major roadblocks of SLLs to academic success. Reading specialists are prepared to work with both L1 readers and L2 readers whose reading ability does not meet their grade level. They took about 9 to 30 credit hours of reading courses from college and university programs in reading education. However, none of the courses is designed to prepare reading specialists to meet the special needs of SLLs and language minority students. Therefore, we would like to make our case clear that teachers need to know more about instructional approaches and strategies that lead SLLs to academic success. The purpose of this article is to share the instructional approaches teachers in the United States who work with English language learners in elementary and secondary classrooms find to be helpful for teaching students how to read in English. We begin by providing information about the teachers and the course. The next major section of this article discusses the instructional approaches. To end, we point out how to maximize the approaches for teaching second language learners in content classrooms.

Background: The Teachers and Course

The information about content area instruction presented in this article is based on what we have learned from students who enrolled in a methods course for teaching content area reading. This upper-level course attracts both graduate and undergraduates elementary and secondary majors. It is offered at a large research-university in the eastern United States. The overall goal of the course is to help prospective teachers develop the knowledge about literacy, especially in reading, to help children read to learn from content area text. Over the years, many who take the course are already classroom teachers or have substantial field experiences working with children. These in-service and pre-service teachers have highly diverse teaching backgrounds. They work at every level—elementary, middle and high school—and in schools located in different settings—urban, suburban, and rural. Many of these students have worked in traditional as well as community-based and volunteer settings. Importantly, all have been in classrooms where SLLs are present. As expected, they indicate that the SLLs they encounter vary greatly in their abilities to speak, read, and write in English.

During the reading methods course, students are encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives on a variety of topics related to teaching and learning. Throughout the semester they must plan content lessons to address the diverse needs of children in terms of reading ability, prior knowledge, economic resources, culture and language.

Over several semesters, we have collected information from the formal classroom discussion, informal interviews, and general conversations that have taken place in the course regarding English language learners. Also, we draw information from students' responses to a questionnaire about instructional practices covered in the course. The questionnaire is presented near the end of the semester and is designed to elicit their opinions about instructional practices relative to SLLs. By this time the questionnaire is given, the students in the course have had a chance to gain knowledge of the research,

practice, and issues for teaching in content classrooms. The questionnaire, completed individually, takes 20 to 25 minutes to finish. A wide range of strategies, techniques, and classrooms practices are presented. The items for the questionnaire are drawn from journal articles about content area and second language reading, content area textbooks, former students in the course, and suggestions from faculty in reading and TESOL.

The 33-item survey presents research-based approaches to content area instruction and other approaches for teaching children who are learning English. The format is fairly simple. Respondents are asked to use a 5-point Likert scale (5 =very important, 1=not important) to rate the importance of using the instructional approaches for teaching English language learners how to read and understand content text.

In order to make sense of the responses, we identified five major clusters/categories into which we place the items on the questionnaire: a) facilitating learning through social interaction, b) providing instruction on syntax and semantics, c) honoring home language and culture, d) utilizing literature and writing, and e) facilitating schema development, metacognitive awareness and strategy use, that serve as organizing clusters for students' responses on the questionnaire. These categories have not only been helpful for organizing the information, but the terms used to indicate each category are closely associated with teaching and learning and also clarify the exact nature of the instructional acts. The next section presents the five categories and briefly explains why it is desirable to include this type of instruction for developing children's ability in reading, especially second language learners. The discussion also presents details about some of the strategies and techniques that can be used by content area teachers to develop SLLs' literacy/reading abilities.

Facilitating Learning through Social Interaction

To understand textbooks, Stetson and Williams (1992) note that readers need to be able to meet the energy requirements for processing information in textbooks. The requirements usually involve making sense of surface structure (decoding) and deep structure (comprehension). Usually, readers have different backgrounds, experiences, and intentions for constructing and interpreting meanings of a text. Often individual readers may construct different meanings for the same text. Yet some readers might fail to understand the text, miss some important points or have unanswered questions (Stetson & Williams, 1992). Providing plenty of opportunities for SLLs to have social interaction with others is a way to increase the reading energy for content area text.

Social interactions through cooperative learning activities can provide SLLs opportunities to use the target language while they engage in interactions with their English-speaking peers to make sense content material (Wong-Fillmore, 1982; Alvermann, & Phelps, 2002). While communicating through the target language, SLLs unconsciously learn how, when and where utterance and academic concepts should be utilized appropriately (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). They can acquire and unconsciously learn about appropriateness of using L2 to represent content knowledge in many different situations.

Most teachers realize a number of factors contribute to the ease or difficulty of reading to learn from content area texts, for example, sentence structures, length of sentence, the amount and difficulty of important vocabulary, the complexity of concepts to be learned and the sheer volume of facts (Stetson & Williams, 1992). These factors make learning to read in the content area textbooks for SLLs far from fun and may negatively influence their motivation to read those texts. Nevertheless, having social

interaction with either their peers who speak their own language or their English speaking peers, in addition to increasing their reading energy, motivates SLLs to learn content concepts through a second language. Encouraging SLLs to have social interaction with native English speaking students also makes SLLs learn a second language in a natural way and in a language-nurturing milieu (Rigg, 1991). According to Nurss and Hough (1989), SLLs are likely to have a strong desire to be a part of a new literacy society. Thus, creating an atmosphere where SLLs can use L2 in discussing concepts from the content area subject will promote not only SLLs' second language proficiency but also understanding of the content. Johns (1992) supports this notion and notes that social interaction helps SLLs by: (1) allowing the students to learn and produce English in a non-threatening, secure environment; (2) creating an atmosphere where children can better understand assignments and adjust to the culture of the school; (3) creating a supportive climate for children to develop friendships with other children who speak different languages; and (4) helping students to raise their self-esteem because teachers create opportunities for them to assume authority in group situations and learn to be active participants who learn from peers. It is clear that social interaction should be a major instructional approach used to help SLLs to learn to read content area texts. Below are several effective collaborative/cooperative techniques that promote learning for SLLs.

■ **Jigsaw.** Jigsaw is one cooperative technique in which one segment of a learning task is assigned to each group member, who works to become an "expert" in that area. After researching their special areas, the experts from each group meet to compare notes and extend their learning. Finally, the original groups reassemble and the experts report their findings. The jigsaw technique might be used, for example, with young SLLs to help them become experts on a favorite animal, a planet of the solar system, or bodies of water.

■ **Writing response group.** Writing response groups can assist SLLs in becoming more independent, improve their writing, give them an audience for their writing, and provide immediate response to their writing. In the groups students share their writing with one another, concentrate on good elements of their writing, and help one another improve their writing. To begin this procedure, teachers should model good response comments and give students specific strategies for improving their papers.

■ **Literature response groups.** Literature response groups help students to use their background knowledge to respond to literature, and become independent readers. Teachers begin this technique by modeling responses to literature and emphasizing a variety of acceptable comments. According to Peregoy and Boyle (2001), these groups help students learn to value individual responses and to support responses with what they have read. Students focus first on individual feelings and later on structure and form. All students, regardless of their ability levels, will be able to respond to narrative stories or share their ideas with one another in writing. However, teachers need to adjust for individual differences. For instance, less capable writers can dictate their ideas to more able students. Students may respond to stories that they read as well as stories that are read aloud to them.

Providing Instruction on Syntax and Semantics

SLLs should attain enough linguistic knowledge about a language in order to tackle the sophistication of surface structure within content area textbooks. Eskey (1986) stated that variables such as a student's imperfect knowledge of the vocabulary in a target language and lack of understanding for the structure of a language can affect comprehension. Often, when SLLs are literate in their native language, they are more capable of processing information even when reading in the L2. Having adequate knowledge of form and function, even in their native language can help SLLs to anticipate meanings, chunk strings of visual information into meaningful units, and make use of the correct cues effectively in order to construct meaning from texts. Insufficient linguistic knowledge also makes SLLs use more reading energy to decode unfamiliar words and structures. This can delay the reading process. According to Smith (1997), when readers encounter difficulty in processing text, cognitive resources like short- term memory need to be allocated to correct the difficulty. Short-term memory, which has a limited capacity to hold information, is overwhelmed because the readers attempt to fill it with too much visual information from the text. It is the nature of short-term memory to clear itself automatically once the purpose or goal has been reached. Consequently, readers who process information in this manner, over utilizing short-memory, get lost and cannot proceed with the next item of business because they are not able to access the information they need.

Earlier research recognized the key role of linguistic knowledge in reading comprehension and asserted that linguistic knowledge—syntactic and semantic—should be a component of L2 reading instruction (Mac-Ginitie & Tretiak, 1971; Simons, 1971). It is important that SLLs have plenty of opportunities to read and experiment with the technique of identifying meanings of hard words in contexts. There is little doubt that linguistic knowledge should be taught to SLLs, but the concern is how it is taught.

To help SLLs master the concepts of English syntax meaningfully and effectively, teachers can present grammatical parsing either by inductive teaching or deductive teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Teachers choose the grammar that is important to the overall reading task to teach after SLLs read a text. On the other hand, the teachers may teach the grammatical rules entailed in the text to the students and give them meaningful examples from the text before they read.

Grammatical knowledge also needs to be included in writing instruction for SLLs. Frodesen (2001) proposed guided writing practice that focuses on a particular grammatical problem and can enhance the effectiveness of the SLLs' writing. This type of instruction can help SLLs reduce grammatical errors in SLLs' writing, build their confidence to use English grammar appropriately and encourage them to develop their linguistic abilities in using sophisticated syntax during writing.

Stetson and Williams (1992) noted that the more key words are foreign to students, the more SLLs waste their time decoding words that consequently interrupt their comprehension. The following techniques have proven to be effective for teaching SLLs syntax and meaning.

- ■ **Preteaching key vocabulary** (Kang, 1994). Preteaching key vocabulary enables SLLs to increase their specific word knowledge about a topic, increase overall reading energy, and allow the readers to devote additional energy to comprehension.

- **Reading aloud** (Norton, 1992). If SLLs have insufficient background knowledge, inadequate linguistic knowledge and less acquired vocabulary in the content area subject, they will need the same help as native readers do from skilled readers. Reading aloud is a good way to provide SLLs with prior knowledge and vocabulary and to enhance SLLs' reading energy.
- **Context clues** (Norton, 1992). Content area teachers should teach SLLs how to use context clues. Knowledge of context clues is defined as knowing that the words surrounding an unknown word can be used to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. This can be a very useful tool during reading. Content area teachers should explicitly explain each kind of context clue and provide clear examples of each type from meaningful texts

Six types of context clues are regularly found in texts:
1. Definition: The word is defined within the content of the book.
2. Comparison: Contrasting words help readers identify unfamiliar words.
3. Summary: The unfamiliar word is a summary of the ideas that precede the word.
4. Familiar expression: Knowledge of a familiar expression helps readers identify unknown words.
5. Experience: Readers' background aids in identifying an unknown word.
6. Synonym: A known synonym can help readers identify an unknown word.

Honoring Students' Home Languages and Cultures

Cummins (1986) noted that considerable research suggest that "students' school success appears to reflect both the solid cognitive/ academic foundation developed through intensive target language instruction and the reinforcement of their cultural identity" (p.376). Further, Cummins asserted that when SLLs are positively oriented toward their own cultural values, they will not perceive themselves as inferior and will experience school success (Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997). In addition, SLLs can also develop their English proficiency more easily when their English lessons are designed on the basis of their cultural heritage (Freeman, & Freeman, 2003) because the lessons are culturally relevant and comprehensible to them.

Even though teachers realize the importance of incorporating students' home languages and cultures in their class, they may be uncertain of how to act on this belief. What should the teachers do if they do not speak the students' languages? When will teachers have the time to learn about the many different cultures and traditions of their students? Freeman and Freeman (2001) suggested several ways to celebrate and honor various languages.

- Ensure that environmental print reflects students' first languages and cultures. A social studies teacher might have students from different countries present information about their own cultures, emphasizing similarities and differences with the target culture or language.
- Supply school and classroom with books, magazines, and other resources in languages other than English. Resources in students' home languages could increase students' reading energy before reading new content. Teachers should look for materials written in L1 that cover critical concepts in the content areas. Rigg and Allen (1989) suggested that the stage of concept development is more significant than levels of English proficiency. Incorporating materials in students' languages is

paramount for providing comprehensible resources and building SLLs' background knowledge.

■ Allow SLLs to respond in their primary languages to demonstrate comprehension of content taught in English. Unable to understand what is taught in class and express their experiences, SLLs remain silent. Teachers should allow those children who are still learning to speak English opportunities to express their thoughts, discuss texts and express their appreciation of texts through their native language (Hudelson, 1987; Krashen, 1991). Miscue analysis has shown that SLLs are able to demonstrate their understandings of reading materials when retelling or discussing reading materials in their native language (Connor, 1981; Rigg, 1989).

■ Have SLLs read and write with volunteer parents who speak their first language. This will encourage them to raise questions and discuss issues that might otherwise be beyond their overall skill in English. Bilingual parents and other native speakers are excellent resources of primary-language support. It is also important for teachers to find out about L1 literacy practices so they can incorporate this information into their instruction (Grant, 1995; Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997). SLLs and their parents need to be included and feel they are a part of the classroom.

Using Literature and Writing

Unfortunately, many content teachers still think that literature is the exclusive territory of English teachers. Indeed, other content area teachers are able to make use of literature in their content class. Vacca and Vacca (2002) defined literature as "any kind of informational or imaginative text whose content illuminates the human experience" (p.74). Content teachers can use fiction (novels, short stories, folk tales, myths, and historical fiction), as well as nonfiction texts (picture books, informational books, diaries and biographies) to introduce concepts, clarify ideas, and help students relate to different topics presented in content texts.

Good quality literature in L1 or L2 is advantageous for SLLs and can help to:

1. **Improve motivation:** Literature can improve motivation and interest in content area classes (Cooter & Flynt, 1996; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) and help SLLs make a connection with what they are interested in (Alvermann, & Phelps, 2002). For example, science teachers might encourage SLLs to read *Jurassic Park* or *The Lost World* to learn about DNA, cloning and species development.

2. **Extend learning:** Using informational books and fiction can enhance SLLs' understanding of concepts and vocabulary pertaining to specific content areas.

In addition to reading good literature, SLLs should be encouraged to write. A considerable body of research (Tierney & Pearson, 1983; Rubin, 1992; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) emphasizes the many shared features of reading and writing. Both reading and writing are acts of composing and are dynamic processes of constructing meaning. Readers and writers are involved in establishing purposes, activating schemata, planning with ideas, monitoring their thinking, and revising and editing their thoughts.

Some of the strategies that teachers can use to encourage reading and responding include:

■ **Journal Writing.** Journal writing can be used to encourage SLLs to express their ideas. Writing provides a forum for SLLs to explore their thoughts and clarify concepts. Journal writing is often used as springboard for class

discussion, problem solving and stimulating imagination. Content area teachers should not emphasize syntactic errors or spelling when responding to what students write. Instead, allow students freely to brainstorm their ideas, organize their thoughts and experiment with newly acquired vocabulary and structures in their journal. Teachers should respond personally and specifically to what the learners write in order to encourage them to take risks in writing to express their thoughts and their understanding.

■ **Essay Writing.** Essay writing is a more formal form of writing through which students can be engaged in discussing, analyzing and synthesizing ideas more deeply and analytically about the subject. Vacca and Vacca (2002) noted that essay writing is an effective writing tool: (1) when content exploration and synthesis, not form and organization, become the primary motives for the writing assignment; (2) when writing involves reading more than a single text source; and (3) when students engage in the writing process (p.275).

Guiding Schema Development, Metacognition and Strategy Use

SLLs' academic skills may be seriously underestimated because they are still developing linguistic competence in English and have limited experience in the target culture (Boyle & Peregoy, 1990). This does not mean that learning from content area textbooks will not be possible for SLLs. Discussion, brainstorming and pre-reading strategies help students develop schemata (mental representations of knowledge) that extend prior knowledge and support comprehension.

Teachers need to be aware of the difficulties SLLs have reading traditional textbooks. Strategic learners can actively plan, organize, elaborate, evaluate and regulate their behaviors in order to acquire new information while learning (Paris et al.,1996; Dole et al., 1991). Helping students to develop metacognitive abilities will help them become strategic learners. Metacognitive knowledge includes self-knowledge that students have about themselves as readers and the task knowledge they possess for skills, strategies and resources. Self-regulation involves "the ability to monitor and regulate comprehension through behaviors and attitudes that capitalize on metacognitive knowledge" (p.40). Metacognitive knowledge is a prerequisite for self-regulation (Vacca & Vacca, 2002). Readers need to have both self-knowledge and task knowledge including strategies to help them monitor and regulate their learning performances.

The unfriendly nature of textbooks used in many content classrooms means teachers need to expose students, especially SLLs, to techniques that support comprehension and develop strategic learners.

1. SCROLL. SCROLL (Grant, 1994) is a procedure for using text headings to help understand, remember and locate information from lengthy, complex, expository texts. The procedure includes:
   ■ **Survey the heading.** In the assigned text selection, read each heading and its subheading. Pose questions about the topic and the type of information the author might present about it.
   ■ **Connect.** After reading all of the headings and subheadings in the selection, ask yourself: "How do the headings relate to one another?"

Write down key words from the headings that might provide connections between the headings.

- **Read the text.** Read the text. Try to use the headings as clues to important information in the text. During reading, look for words and phrases that express important information about the heading. Students are encouraged to mark the text (underline, highlight, make notes in the margin) to point out important ideas and details. Also, they are reminded to stop, after reading each segment of text, to make sure that you understand the major ideas and supporting details. Rereading is suggested when comprehension is not achieved.

- **Outline.** Outline the major ideas and supporting details in the heading segment. Try to outline each heading segment without looking back to the text.

- **Look back.** Look back to the text and check the accuracy of your major ideas and details. Correct any inaccurate information in your outline.

2. **LETME.** LETME (Grant, 1994) is a strategy used to promote and improve learners' self-monitoring. LETME emphasizes activities such as clarifying the purpose for reading, focusing on important points, monitoring progress, questioning oneself to determine if goals were achieved, and dealing with comprehension failures. The LETME procedure consists of the following metacognitive macro strategies:

- **Linking.** Pinpoint the goal of the reading task, survey the text for content overview, associate prior knowledge, and develop a study plan.

- **Extracting.** Select the important elements by underlining or annotating text to identify the author's cues.

- **Transforming.** Stress organize, condense, and prioritize important information. Mapping, outlining, and summarizing may be helpful.

- **Monitoring.** Focus on self-question, self-testing, and fix-up strategies.

- **Extending.** Examine the significance of ideas through application, synthesis, and evaluation.

3. **Reciprocal Teaching.** The reciprocal teaching developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984) includes four effective reading strategies: self-questioning, summarizing, clarifying and predicting, which are regarded as metacognitive skills involved in reading (Baker & Brown, 1984). Within the reciprocal teaching procedure, teachers explicitly model and provide explanations of what the effective reading strategies are, how they can be used, when and why they need to be used. Clearly described, SLLs who are instructed in an explicit reciprocal teaching technique will be aware of their own thinking and reading processes (Adunyarittigun, & Grant, in press; Soonthornmanee, 2002). They can strategically design effective plans of reading, such as setting purposes of reading and formulating hypotheses by using self-questioning and predicting strategies. While reading, they can monitor their thinking process by using a self-questioning strategy to check whether

comprehension has occurred. If comprehension is not achieved, a clarifying strategy is employed. Summarizing could be another strategy used to monitor and evaluate readers' comprehension. These strategies taught within the reciprocal teaching framework can heighten readers metacognitive awareness of the active nature of reading, of task demands and setbacks encountered and of self-regulating in order to reach an attainable goal—comprehension (Brown et al., 1981; Slater, & Horstman, 2002; Soonthornmanee, 2002; Hashey, & Connors, 2003; Oczhus, 2003).

Maximizing Instructional Approaches

The instruction approaches presented here were those identified over several semesters by successful teachers and promising teacher trainees as important for developing the English reading skills of second language learners during content instruction. All of the approaches have been helpful for both native English speakers as well as children who are still learning to speak and read in English. We believe that the effectiveness of the approaches can be maximized if content teachers assume a role as a reflective diagnostic practitioner. Walker (2000) noted that the reflective diagnostic teacher is one who considers and selects among alternatives and, at the same time, anticipates consequences of differing decisions before, during, and after a reading event. Teachers should select the approaches they use after carefully considering their students' strengths and needs. This is especially important when teaching SLLs. In addition to the formal approaches to instruction, teachers need to also utilize their students' home languages and cultures as well as stimulate their existing cognitive structures and tap the rich background knowledge they possess. As a result, children learning English will be motivated, strategic and independent in every classroom.

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