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What Strategies Can I Incorporate So That the English Language Learners in My Classroom Will Better Understand Oral Directions?

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Concerned that her English language learners (ELLs) are having difficulty understanding her oral directions, Richards sets out to uncover ways in which she can communicate more effectively with her second- and third-grade students. By reading relevant literature, observing classroom interactions, and interviewing her students—ELL students and native speakers alike—Richards finds that all children can benefit from small changes in classroom practices. Richards's study is unique in that it provides readers with an example of student empowerment, showcases teacher self-examination, and provides practical applications for others who work with English language learners.

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MY STORY

I teach second- and third-grade students in a multiage class at John Muir Elementary School. Muir School is part of the Madison Metropolitan School District in Madison, Wisconsin. Each school in the MMSD is site-based managed, meaning that the staff at each school is responsible for developing its own goals and curriculum to correlate with state and national standards.

The enrollment at John Muir is 470 students from early childhood to fifth grade. Students come to Muir from various neighborhoods. Two of the nearby neighborhoods are inhabited mostly by White, middle- to upper-class residents; the third neighborhood contains mostly subsidized housing for low-income families, most of whom are minorities. The population of John Muir is diverse, and several countries and ethnicities are represented. Of the 470 students, 59 percent are Caucasian, 19 percent are African American, 13 percent are Asian, 9 percent are Hispanic, and 1 percent are Native American.

John Muir's school improvement plan includes high academic goals for all students. The plan outlines that every student will perform at grade level in reading and math by the end of each school year. Regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, and support staff work closely with each other to strive to meet these goals.

Because John Muir is a site-based school, it does not have adopted textbooks or curricula for reading, science, or math. Teachers are responsible for generating their own curricula and materials that correlate with state and national standards for their grade levels.

This year my class consisted of 14 second graders and 10 third graders; 14 were boys and 10 were girls. Eleven of my students were Caucasian, four were Asian, three were Hispanic, two were African American, one was African, one was European, and two were biracial. About half of my class received free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch at school. For 10 students, English was a second language. Toward the end of the school year, nine of those students were still receiving English as a second language (ESL) services. I had two students from Korea, two from Mexico, one from India, one from Venezuela, one from Togo, Africa, one from Germany, and one whose father speaks only Spanish. Of this group of ESL students, seven had started school at John Muir in kindergarten or first grade. The other two students, both in second grade, came to Madison during the first week of school, and spoke little or no English. Because John Muir uses an inclusion model, all English language learners stayed in my classroom all day and received support each morning. During math, a bilingual resource specialist (BRS) came into my room, and for the literacy block (spelling, reading, and writing), I was joined by an ESL teacher.

Thanks to a state-funded Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) grant, eight of my students worked in another classroom each morning in order to maintain a 16:1 student-teacher ratio.

Because of my class's multiage format, I am able to loop with my second graders every year and welcome them back to my room each fall as third graders. This has helped to create a unique and invaluable sense of community and build a framework that cannot otherwise be duplicated. I truly loved my class this year. They were a very open, honest, and sincere group, always willing to help me or each other without having to be asked to do so. They had amazing, unique ideas and frequently complimented one another on those ideas. My relationship with my students this year was special in that we had a great deal of love, respect, and trust for one another and therefore felt very comfortable having frank and productive conversations as a group or individually. I can only hope to have a group like this again in my teaching career.

MY QUESTION

When I was given the opportunity to join a classroom action research project, my ears perked up. Because my previous experience with action research had been so positive and eye-opening, I knew I couldn't go wrong in doing another project. I became especially interested when I saw that one of the topics was English language learners. With eight ELL students in my classroom, how could I not accept the chance to learn more about them and my methods of teaching them? I signed up right away and started thinking about forming a question that would help both the ELL students and me.

One thing that I noticed in my classroom early last fall was that the ELL students asked a lot of questions during class. Of course, I expected many questions from these new learners and did everything I could to answer their questions and help them succeed. However, the *timing* of these questions was of particular interest to me. Whenever I finished giving directions for an assignment, task, or project, I offered the students the chance to ask questions for clarification. On a few occasions, maybe one or two hands would go up, but not necessarily the hands of the ELL students. After a few weeks, I began noticing a pattern in my ELL students' questions about my directions. Nearly every time I finished giving directions and then asked, "Do you have any questions?" the room was relatively quiet. However, no sooner did I send the students off to work independently than up to the front of the room came a swarm of students who seemed to have little understanding of the task at hand. It was at this point in the lesson (the point at which I thought everyone knew what to do) that

I heard students saying, "What are we doing?" "I don't get it," and "What should we do first?" Initially, I was very patient with these students and helped them get through the activities, which usually had multistep directions. However, as the first quarter went on, I noticed that this was happening at the same point in *every* lesson, *every* day, week after week, and that each time almost the same students were questioning the routine and asking the same questions. Of the eight ELL students, the same three or four always seemed to need repeated instructions before they could start working. However, two boys were at opposite ends of the spectrum. While neither truly understood what my expectations were, one of them listened to directions yet rarely asked for clarification, and the other never heard the directions in the first place because he simply wasn't listening!

I had to do something. Why was I not reaching the ELL students? I was talking more slowly than usual, giving visual examples of what to do, asking for help from the class, and offering the whole group the chance to ask questions before getting started. Yet, in the end, I had four or five students rushing up to me as if they had not heard me in the first place! What was going on? I knew I had to act fast or we were all bound to suffer. It was from these experiences and reflective turmoil that my research question was born: **What strategies can I incorporate so that the English language learners in my classroom will better understand oral directions?**

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

I set about trying to find answers to my questions. What was leading to this lack of understanding in the ELL students? I figured the best ways to find out were to watch, read, and ask. To learn more, I observed my students during class time and kept a journal of what I saw. In addition, I read the book *Learning to Learn in a Second Language* by Pauline Gibbons (1991). Finally, I developed an interview to conduct with my ELL students that would, I hoped, help me get to the bottom of the issue.

Observing my students during class time turned out to be more of a challenge than I initially thought it would be. Because I had 24 students and limited teaching time and was not as organized as I could have been, I tended to put on the back burner the tasks of making observations and writing in my journal. I did, however, get enough chances to watch my students that I was able to make some valuable conclusions about their behaviors. I also wrote and reflected frequently about my teaching methods and how they affected my students.

In several of my early journal entries, I mentioned that my teaching style might be one of the strongest factors in the ELL students' confusion

or lack of understanding. By nature, I am a fast talker, and even native English speakers often misunderstand me. Furthermore, as a teacher with a constructivist teaching philosophy, I want to spend the least amount of time possible on teacher-led instruction in order to maximize my students' experiential learning time. Therefore I tend to rush my explanations and deliberately leave small details out so that my students can explore and learn on their own. My first journal entry, written in October, read as follows:

Because of my teaching style, I may be missing some of my ELL kids because they don't understand the direction/expectations. I need to make some changes so that they all feel comfortable and "with" the group. I also don't want them to be afraid to ask for help or clarification . . . what can I do so that they "get it" and I am saved from frustration? More directions? Written directions? On overhead? Modeling? Have students repeat directions?

As can be seen in this early journal entry, I knew specifically what the problem was and actually made my own suggestions for making a change in order to solve that problem.

Aside from my speedy delivery of instructions and expectations, I was still confusing the ELL students on a daily basis. Regularly, upon giving directions and/or modeling an activity, I asked my students if they had any questions. As I mentioned earlier, I usually got no more than two or three questions, and they were not necessarily all from the ELL students. However, no sooner had I sent the students off to work independently than I would be approached by two or three ELL students who had little or no idea of what they were supposed to do! Their questions made this obvious. One journal entry that I wrote following a math lesson expressed my frustration:

Once I thought every student understood the expectations, I gave two separate opportunities to ask questions. At that point, nobody chose to take advantage and ask a question. So I gave one last reminder and set the kids to work. At the moment they set to work, three ELLs approached me and claimed that they did not know what to do! Arrgghh! Why? Why is this happening? Why don't they get it? Why didn't they ask? What did I do wrong?

I began putting pressure on myself. I take great pride in the progress I am able to make with students, and I felt that this issue was a major road-block in the progress I planned to make with the ELL students. I started

monitoring myself during class to try to see what was lacking in my communication with the students. Later in the semester I had a difficult lesson with my students, particularly the ELL students, and wrote this entry in my journal that night:

Today I made some mistakes in my teaching that directly affected my ELLs and reaffirmed my need and desire for change . . . I only gave the directions orally, and had *several* questions from the ELLs. It was as though a three-step direction was too much or too overwhelming. Was it too much to remember or were the directions too hard? In retrospect, it would have been so easy to write the directions on the board, ask for the steps repeated back to me, or both! This could have helped me reach my ELLs and possibly even more students.

When the ELL students asked for clarification, the most common statements I heard were, "What do we do?" followed closely by "I don't get it," and "What are we supposed to do?" The comments were not limited to these three, but these were definitely the ones I heard most frequently and that frustrated me the most, because they came immediately after I gave full directions. Almost always, the ELL students approached me with their questions rather than raising their hands, and some even waited until there were no other students around before talking with me. Because of the continual necessity for an extra question-and-answer period, as well as the apparent discomfort the ELL students were feeling, I decided to develop a short interview to conduct with each of them in order to find out more.

Interviewing my students proved to be very helpful to me in this situation. Sitting one-on-one with each of the ELL students and asking them questions specific to the issue helped me discover how much I was contributing to the problem without even knowing it. One of the great benefits of these interviews was seeing how comfortable and candid the students were with me. Watching them formulate honest and open answers made me feel good and reinforced my belief that I was doing a nice job with these students.

The interview I created consisted of seven open-ended questions (see Appendix: Student Interview), which asked students about their level of understanding, confusion, and comfort in the classroom. I chose to interview eight of the nine ELL students, because at the time the student who had just arrived from Germany was not comfortable enough with English to have a conversation with me. At home, these students spoke Korean, Spanish, Ewe (from Africa), and Gujrati (from India).

I noticed certain strong themes while analyzing the responses to my interview questions. Of the eight students I interviewed, seven claimed to be confused sometimes when I gave directions in front of the class. The other

student, a second-grade girl who received speech and language services, claimed to always understand my directions, yet she seemed to be one of the students who usually needed additional assistance understanding and getting started. I decided to omit this student's interview, as it did not seem to correlate with my other findings regarding her progress. Another student, a second-grade boy who had difficulty paying attention in class, claimed to be confused when I gave directions but, unlike the other students, blamed it on his constant talking and lack of attention during class. I appreciated his honesty, but decided to omit his interview as well and work on that problem with him at another time. A third student went through the entire interview, answered most of the questions accurately, and then after the interview divulged to me, "I don't know what 'confused' means." That was my first important lesson right there! I did keep this student's interview because she gave some helpful answers to my questions.

Of the six students who claimed to be confused during my oral directions, I heard the following responses when I followed up with the question, "Why?"

"I don't get it when sometimes you say something and I don't understand because some words I didn't know before."

"Fancy words."

"I miss directions. I didn't understand you because of how fast you're talking."

"I don't understand English."

"I don't know every one of the words in America."

The students used the words "angry," "confused," "desperate," "sad," and "crazy" to describe how they felt when they were perplexed in the classroom. This broke my heart, but it also surprised me because I hadn't realized before that the problem was this serious.

As reinforcement for both the students and myself, I asked them what strategies I already used that helped them better understand directions. This was useful because it gave me information about strategies I should use more frequently as well as those that were not as helpful as I thought. Helpful strategies mentioned were writing things down, telling what the "fancy" words mean (I interpreted this as focusing more on vocabulary), repeating directions, having students ask a friend for help, showing what to do, and telling how to do things "out loud so everybody can hear it."

The interview question that was the most helpful to me was, "What could I do to help you understand?" Going into the interview, I was not

sure I would get strong responses to this question. I was wrong! Almost every student had two or three suggestions ready for me without hesitation. Suggestions included:

"Not talk so fast—slow down."

"Don't read so fast—repeat words."

"Tell about big words. Explain parts again."

"Tell directions two times."

"Slow down."

"Tell me what it means."

These responses were interesting because the same responses were made to the previous question about helpful strategies I already used. I concluded that I was dabbling in helpful strategies but not making them a consistent part of my teaching repertoire.

The final two questions for each student were about their comfort level in asking me for help alone and in front of the other students. All but one of the students said that they were comfortable in both situations; the one student who wasn't said that he feared that other children would stare or laugh at him if he asked questions. With this child, I discussed the safe environment in our classroom and encouraged him to feel better about speaking up. The most thoughtful and heartwarming response was from the second-grade student from Africa. To my question, "Do you feel comfortable asking me for help in front of the other kids? Why?" she responded, "Yes, because it's good to. Because if other kids don't understand they could hear me and they could understand when you answer." What a model response from a student who could not speak English two years before!

Once I noticed the strength of these themes and patterns in my conversations with the students, I decided that it might also be helpful to interview a small sample of the native English speakers to see what they thought. I interviewed two second-grade boys, a third-grade boy, and a third-grade girl. The third-grade students had also been in my class for second grade. I gave these four students the exact same prompts and questions that I did the ELL students. I was sure that their responses to the first question about understanding my directions would be, "I understand you," and that the interviews would take about 7 seconds each. I was wrong. *All four* of these native-English-speaking students said that they sometimes got confused when I was talking! Wait a minute here! If I was confusing the English speakers, then what on earth was I doing to the ELL students? I felt terrible.

I began to feel a little better as the interviews progressed. One student admitted that he was not listening to me, and another tried to blame his confusion on chatty classmates. A third student's response was a bit more helpful in that he claimed to not understand specific math terms. For example, "When you say minus or you say a number I don't get it. I don't get what 'divided' means or 1 equals 1. I don't get it." This reiterated the idea that I should teach vocabulary before a lesson and consistently monitor for comprehension of terms. The fourth student, the third-grade boy, said that he didn't "really understand what you're supposed to do and I get them mixed up, like what to do first, next . . ." I assumed that this might have been because I was speaking too quickly when explaining steps or directions to the group. I did find it helpful when I asked each of these students for suggestions on what was helpful so far and what may be helpful in the future. To these questions, I got the following responses:

What do I do to help you understand?

"Show me how to do it."

"Write it on the board."

"Do stuff on the board because then I can see."

"Explain it to me."

What else could I do?

"Come over and explain it to me."

"Make it easier so that I could understand. Repeat it one or two times."

I found it very helpful to chat with these students and gain different perspectives and feedback on how I was doing. It seemed to me that they had some of the same needs as the ELL students. This excited me, because now I realized that making changes to my teaching methods was really going to benefit everyone.

The conclusion I drew from the interviews confirmed what I already believed. The two main reasons the ELL students were having difficulty understanding were the new English words I was using and the speed at which I was speaking. These results did not surprise me, but why had I not done anything about it yet? I guess I had adopted the theory that immersion and experience would have the same valuable effect as each other, but I was quickly corrected as I had these conversations with the students. Indeed, the students were quickly learning a great deal as they experienced daily life in the classroom. However, the "dive right in" theory didn't prove to be as

effective as I had previously thought, because it was not giving the students the academic and curriculum-related vocabulary they needed to succeed.

In *Learning to Learn in a Second Language*, Gibbons (1991) generalizes common characteristics of ELL students in a new or unfamiliar learning environment. Although her study was based on students in Australia, I was amazed at the similarities between the students whom she studied and the students I was working with. I really enjoyed reading Gibbons's work and found it very useful in helping me better understand the ELL population in my classroom.

In Australian schools, roughly 25 percent of the student population speaks English as a second language (Gibbons, 1991). With nine ELL students in my class of 24, I was *exceeding* that average! Was I going to get some sort of award or special training for accepting such a challenge? Not formally, but the benefits and experience that these students gave me were reward enough. The unfortunate part for them, however, is that I did not know much about their past experiences or their learning styles. In order to best meet the needs of this mostly shy and terrified yet eager group of exceptional ELL students, I needed to learn about and become more sensitive to where they were coming from . . . and in the meantime meet the needs of 16 other second and third graders. It was time to act, and act fast.

My group of students was diverse not in terms only of ethnicity but also of culture, family background, and experiences. The nine ELL students represented six countries and five continents. Some of them were from wealthy, educated families; others were from poor, single-parent, refugee families. Most of these children had attended school in their native countries, but the experiences were much different from John Muir, either because of conditions of extreme poverty or extreme wealth. In addition to previous school experiences, it is also important to consider students' oral and writing skills, not only in English but also in their native languages. If students are struggling in their own language, it is likely that they will continue to struggle while learning a second or third language.

Gibbons (1991) suggests that ELL students fit into one of three general categories:

1. Students new to the country from a non-English-speaking background;
2. Students born in the country but who enter school with little or no English; and
3. Students who have received all or a portion of their education in the country, but whose family speaks one or more languages other than English at home.

While two of my students fit into category #1, because they moved to the United States just a few days before starting in my classroom, the remaining seven fit into category #3. Each of these students had moved to the United States at a younger age and then either started school as kindergartners or joined school at his or her age-appropriate grade level. Every one of the ELL students spoke a language other than English at home. I found that this set them up for challenges in having to assimilate, almost immediately, into an English-speaking classroom.

Another interesting point made in *Learning to Learn in a Second Language* is that there is a difference between conversational, functional English and what Pauline Gibbons calls "playground language." When people (such as myself) assume that children learning English will learn best if they are surrounded by peers who speak English and can provide them the necessary tools to "pick up" the English language, we are right, but within limits. Indeed, young children are quick to pick up English when they are placed in situations in which English is spoken; however, they are obtaining "playground language," quickly acquired language that allows children to survive in social situations with peers. These situations may include interactive play at recess or in physical education class, conversations at lunch or in the halls, or any other situations that require basic conversations with peers. This type of interaction typically occurs between children face to face, and is often dependent on eye contact, gesturing, and body language (Gibbons, 1991).

Playground language differs greatly from the academic language required for survival in the classroom. Language such as mathematics vocabulary, science terms, oral and written directions, and cognitive vocabulary such as "estimate," "infer," "predict," "assume," "hypothesize," "generalize," "rationalize, and a host of other words and terms may pose major challenges to ELL students. This language can take much longer to learn and eventually master than playground language, as it is often more abstract and offers fewer visual cues to assist with comprehension. According to Gibbons, it may take as many as five years before ELL students comprehend these ideas as well as their peers do (Gibbons, 1991). It is very important for teachers to take these ideas of language "type" and language acquisition into account when setting goals and expectations for students.

Some of the strategies Gibbons identifies as commonly used by ELL students who are having difficulties were interesting to me and related directly to the strategies I thought I was seeing in my classroom. These students gain the ability to hide the challenges they are facing and create a façade that helps them to appear as able, competent English speakers. They may use selective listening to block out oral directions and questions, or request additional speaking from the teacher (Gibbons, 1991).

In instances when students do feel comfortable enough to participate in activities or discussions, they will typically display a variety of characteristics that communicate their difficulty with learning a new language. Some of the identified characteristics follow (Gibbons, 1991):

Listening: The student has trouble following multistep directions, has difficulty concentrating, demonstrates an inability to predict what is next, has difficulty with key words that may change the meaning of the text, and has continued difficulty distinguishing certain sounds.

Speaking: The student shows strengths in both oral language and play-ground language, may sound especially loud or impolite in certain situations, says the same "comfortable" things frequently, and has trouble with sentence structure, grammar, and sequencing.

Reading: The student may read slowly, have difficulty identifying main ideas, comprehending, and retelling, have trouble reading for meaning, making predictions, and drawing conclusions, and may neglect to self-correct while reading aloud.

Writing: The student has low written language skills, writes in a "chatty," conversational manner without paragraphs or sequencing, uses simple sentences with limited vocabulary, has poor grammar and spelling, and writes short pieces that tend to be a repeat of previous pieces.

Pauline Gibbons's work in Australia truly intrigued me because her findings so closely paralleled the conclusions I had made about my students. She also identified some characteristics that I had not previously taken into consideration that pertained to the ELL students in my classroom. For example, the third-grade boy from Venezuela always wrote in a very casual, "chatty" manner, and I had assumed that he was picking this up from his high school-age brother. Little did I know that this was such a common habit of ELL students. In addition, it was actually quite comforting and reassuring to see that the students I was working with were progressing at a speed that was expected and were accomplishing no less than the "average" student learning English as a second language.

My research activities of observing, journaling, interviewing, and reading helped me to see that I had a truly exceptional group of ELL students in my classroom. In the end, the most important thing I learned was that I had a lot more to learn about them! Each one of the ELL students brought into my world experiences with culture and education, and exposure to different English language skills. This was truly an enlightening and educational experience, and I could not wait to put my new findings to work.

MAKING CHANGES FOR EVERYONE

Because of my own learning style as well as the curious, eager, and responsive learning styles of my students, I decided that the best way to find out how I could maximize understanding in my classroom would be to use trial and error. Almost immediately after I identified my question of incorporating strategies to improve oral directions for my ELL students, I began thinking of specific things I could try. I took suggestions from the students whom I interviewed and also invented a few of my own strategies. I tried each strategy for a few days at a time, then watched and waited. The results were astounding, and I have since decided that I should have done this project years ago!

The first and most important changes I made were to slow down my rate of speech even more and to make sure that I was enunciating well when I spoke. Throughout my teen years, one of my mother's most famous quips was, "Shannon, you need to speak slowly and clearly." Naturally, years later, my mother is still right! I am by nature a very fast talker, and my words tend to run together, sometimes to the point of being incomprehensible. Because I had such a large number of ELL students, I knew right away in the fall that I would need to make changes in the way I talked in order to reach all of my students. I did; however, I did not change enough. Later, after identifying my problem, I made even bigger changes and began slowing down, making all sounds clearly, and speaking very deliberately to all my students. These steps were accompanied by more contact with the students as well as increased attentive listening from the whole group, because it seemed as though I was speaking more dramatically. Eventually I found myself using more inflection, expression, and tone and volume changes.

I noticed improvements after making this small adaptation to my teaching style. Students made more eye contact with me, followed along with their eyes and ears, and seemed to better grasp the things I was saying. This was true not only of the ELL students but of other students as well. I also noticed that my communication with the families of ELL students became more positive and effective because, by slowing down, I showed that I had time for them and genuinely wanted them to understand the things I was saying. I found that all students were asking fewer questions when I was finished talking, and in the event that a student did have a question, it was because of a difficult direction or another distraction in the classroom. Sometimes when I didn't have much time, I forgot my new strategy and returned to my old ways of hurried, muddled talking. I could always tell I was making this mistake due to the number of hands in the air and students out of their seats asking for help. I needed several self-reminders in addition to a few student reminders ("Mrs. Richards, could you please

talk a little slower?") in order to move toward making this simple change a permanent strategy in my teaching repertoire. It was amazing how such a small change made such a colossal difference to the success of my students. Now they were able to hear and understand my directions the *first* time through and to feel intelligent and empowered when they could get right to work independently like the rest of their classmates.

Another strategy I used was repeating directions. The concept seemed easy, but I quickly found the practice to be tricky. This was because I needed to identify the fine line between helping the students (with repeated exposure) and insulting their intelligence (with unnecessary repetition). I certainly wanted to help them without insulting them, so I knew that I would need to adopt a method of providing the repetition they needed without sounding like a broken record. I decided to use a tone of voice and an attitude that empowered the students and made them feel smart, capable, and in control of their own learning. So I varied my strategies a bit. Sometimes I would say the directions as I demonstrated the task and then repeat them a few minutes later as if reviewing them, not only for the students but also for myself. At other times, I would write the directions on the board while or shortly after I gave them orally, so that students who needed additional exposure or a reminder could refer to them as much as they needed. Sometimes I would write full sentences for each step; at other times I wrote just one word for each step so that students could practice recalling the steps with one clue. Another method of repetition that I tried was asking the students themselves to repeat directions back to me. After explaining the lesson or activity in multiple steps, I would ask a student (either an ELL or a native English speaker) to help me out by telling me what to do first, next, and so on. Sometimes I would ask, "Who can tell me what to do first?" and take volunteers. Occasionally I would choose a student who I knew needed the review or was paying attention during directions. At other times, when the direction was obvious, like putting a name on an assignment, I would ask the whole group what they were going to do first and let them all tell me in unison.

I found all these methods very effective in helping the students understand directions through repetition. Through observations, I noticed that the ELL students began to better understand my oral directions the first or second time, asked fewer questions, and got started on their work more quickly compared to earlier in the school year. In addition, I am sure that these strategies helped some of my native English speakers, because I also noticed several of them asking fewer questions and getting to work faster. It was encouraging to see the whole group benefiting from this experiment. All learners were having their needs met in my classroom through my use of these small extra teaching techniques that took literally seconds to employ.

Modeling is another strategy that I learned I should do more often, particularly with such a high concentration of ELL students in my classroom. Modeling strategies for doing assignments was something that I frequently cast aside, because my eager and capable group seemed not to need it. I failed to see the true value of modeling until I decided to incorporate it into my daily routine. Whenever possible, I stood before my class while giving directions and did exactly what I wanted them to do so that they could see it happening as they heard the directions. This was beneficial not only to my students but also to me. The students were able to see me doing the same work I expected them to do. Sometimes, because the activity was new to me as well as to them, I made mistakes, and then I asked the students questions to help clarify my mistakes. This allowed me to alter my plans as I worked so that the plans were more appropriate for the students. The more I modeled and let the students see me in action, the more we were able to teach and learn from each other, and the more we understood each other. The visual learners were getting what they needed, as were the tactile, oral, and aural learners, because I was covering the assignment from all angles. When I really wanted to ensure complete understanding, I gave directions orally, modeled the assignment, and then wrote the directions on the board. This is what I eventually found myself doing most often. Even though it meant a little extra patience from and listening for the students who got it the first time, I heard very few complaints. I know my efforts helped each and every one of my students at one time or another.

One thing I had to watch out for was what I call "overmodeling." I didn't want students to get to see me do a complete task. I feared that overmodeling would lead to too much direct imitation and limit the authentic work my students were capable of. I found that it was best to model the first couple of steps, leaving the remaining components of the assignment up to each individual student. That way, I was helping everyone get started without hindering their creativity.

Other strategies that I incorporated included teaching vocabulary words in lessons in all subjects, assigning peer helpers who could aid with understanding, and waiting to pass out materials until all students understood the directions. I used these strategies only a few times, but from what I saw they were also effective in assisting the ELL students as well as the other students in my classroom.

I think that I became more patient and more accepting of the fact that I needed to take time to ensure understanding by repeating myself and answering questions. I also set higher standards for behavior during class time when I was giving directions. This way, even the students who blamed their lack of understanding on other students (or on themselves!), were able to gain a better understanding of the expectations.

Finally, I continued providing the students with plenty of opportunities to ask questions to clarify or better comprehend what was going on in the classroom. Although the students (ELL students in particular) did not always take advantage of the chance to ask questions in front of the group, overall the total number of questions decreased significantly, thus meeting my goal for this action research project. From now on, I plan to make all these new teaching strategies a permanent part of my teaching repertoire, because I am confident that they are fail-safe and critical to the success of all of my students.

THE GREATEST GIFT TO MYSELF

When all was said and done and I was wrapping up another school year, I realized that everyone had benefited from this project. I feel that I definitely attained my goal of improving and adding to my teaching strategies to help the ELL students in the class better understand my directions. Overall, I noticed these students watching me more closely during my teaching time, making more eye contact, participating more in discussions, and asking significantly fewer questions about what they needed to do. This led to better relationships between the ELL students and myself and an overall stronger feeling of trust, cooperative learning, and community.

Going into this project, I wasn't planning to involve my native-English-speaking students that much in the classroom action research process. I figured that they weren't struggling much with my teaching tactics, and that on those occasions when they didn't hear or understand me, it was for a reason other than a lack of language experience or my speaking too fast. Little did I know that some of these students were feeling the same way as the ELL students! I was quite surprised when the responses from the small group of native-English-speaking students showed many similarities to those from the ELL students. They too felt that I was talking quickly and perhaps not explaining or modeling key concepts enough for them to succeed independently. This was a real eye-opener for me, because teaching independent work habits is one of the foundations of my teaching philosophy. I'm so glad that I decided to involve my other students in this study because, along with so many other aspects of this project, doing so forced me to take a look at my teaching practices and to make changes needed to help all of my students reach their maximum potential all day, every day.

Finally, I was the person who may possibly have been the most directly affected by this yearlong project. I made changes to my teaching practice in the interest of my students. Because they are my number one priority day in and day out, it was very important that I stayed focused and strived to

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be the best teacher I could for them. In doing so, I think I really did help myself become the best teacher I could be. I got to know my students so much better and on a more personal level than in other years because I made such an investment in them when I committed to this project. I developed close, trusting relationships with the ELL students and their families but also grew closer to the rest of my students because I grew to understand them better as well. I learned about the things that I do well in my classroom each day and the things that I may want to change in order to have a positive, one-to-one interaction with each of my students every day for 180 days. I received more feedback this year from students and families than I can remember receiving in the past, and although some of it could be considered "constructive criticism," most of it was positive feedback and encouragement to continue what I was doing with these students in room 29 at John Muir Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin. This was truly one of the greatest learning opportunities that I have undergone, and I know that the lessons I took away from it will last the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

To me, the term *equity* was always something that I thought I could easily practice: the inclusion of all students and their families, equal treatment for all, and a general sense of fairness in everything I did. I had adopted a somewhat "textbook" definition of equity and was willing to give lip service to the concept to anyone who would listen. I assumed that because I had bought into what I thought was the correct definition of equity, everyone with whom I shared it would think I was wonderful and doing the best possible job as a teacher. After completing the classroom action research project, "What Strategies Can I Incorporate So That the English Language Learners in My Classroom Will Better Understand Oral Directions?" my personal definition of equity changed dramatically. Now, to me, *equity* is a place, a state of being, a feeling. To feel and experience equity is to feel safe and comfortable in your own skin, no matter who you are, where you are, or who you are with. To create equity means to create safety and comfort for people from different countries, neighborhoods, and experiences as well as for people with different colors.

We need to keep in mind that diversity is represented by so much more than simply skin color. It is represented by where we live, how we are treated, and how we treat others. To me, diversity runs through the soul. That is one of the most important lessons I took with me out of this classroom action research experience. Because of this lesson, I knew immediately that I needed to make some changes in my behavior, both professionally and personally.

Once I truly opened my eyes and took a look at the students, families, and colleagues I was working with each day, I realized how widespread diversity is in our society. In my classroom, I discovered that I was simply part of a microcosm of the wider world. Not every teacher in every school can say this; many schools across America do not represent the real world. I was fortunate enough to have a true "melting pot" in my classroom that year. Not only did I have students from six different countries learning English as a second language, but my English-speaking students were from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and socioeconomic levels. This created a wonderful learning experience for my students and me and also for anyone coming into Room 29 to teach or learn throughout the year. I don't think that I would have looked at my class and its population as closely or with as much appreciation if it had not been for this project.

I also have the project to thank for opening my eyes outside the classroom and allowing me to recognize the vast diversity that exists right here in Madison, Wisconsin. I have become more aware of people around me as well as more sensitive to where they may be coming from. I feel that I view people with more respect and patience. After all, isn't that what we all deserve?

It was interesting and enlightening to me when I discovered that the majority of my ELL students were having difficulty understanding me in the classroom. It wasn't especially surprising. I knew that the non-English-speaking children would have a hard time with just about everything at first. However, it was particularly eye-opening to learn that most of them were having trouble for the same main reason: I was talking too fast. As I stated in my study, I felt bad about this and immediately promised myself to make some changes. Originally, I only intended to interview my ELL students and work with their responses. However, once I saw the pattern in those responses, I decided to add a few English-speaking students to my survey group, perhaps to serve as a control group. Again, I was completely taken aback by the fact that these students, too, were missing directions in the classroom because I was saying them too fast! Without the impetus of the classroom action research project, I never would have known that talking at my usual rate was a problem (and such a solvable one at that) preventing many of my students from working to their full potential. Because of the practical, reflective nature of classroom action research, I was able to identify, internalize, and improve something in my teaching that was keeping me from being the best I could be. It is for this reason that I feel that all teachers should be required to complete a classroom action research project at some point in their careers!

Teaching tolerance and acceptance has been a core piece of my curriculum each year. I expect every student in my classroom to be accepting and tolerant of and helpful toward other people, no matter what. I realize each

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year that I have some students who are not, sometimes because they choose not to be and other times because they have not been taught how to be. I take pride in the fact that, by the end of every school year, I can see my students acting with more kindness and patience toward and acceptance of each other. Now that I have completed this project that had so much to do with equity and diversity, I feel that I myself am a stronger person who is more tolerant, accepting, and patient. I know that I have transferred these characteristics to my students more since the project and will continue to do so in the future.

From this point onward, I hope to spread my newfound knowledge to students, families, and colleagues with whom I work each day. I think it would be beneficial to share my work with others and show how much I have learned and grown by looking at myself not only as a professional, but also as a person and a member of society. The best way to make these changes was to look within myself and my practice, something everyone can and should do not just once but every single day.

APPENDIX: STUDENT INTERVIEW

Preface: I want you to answer all my questions as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. When I give directions to the class (when I am talking in front of everyone), do you always understand what I am saying or do you sometimes get confused? Why?
2. How do you feel when you get confused?
3. What kinds of things do I do for you that help you understand?
4. What else do you think I could do to help you understand? What would help you?
5. Do you feel comfortable asking me for help? Why?
6. Do you feel comfortable asking me for help in front of the other kids? Why?

REFERENCE

Gibbons, P. (1991). *Learning to learn in a second language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.