

Chapter 8

Effective Teaching Practices for Academic Literacy Development of Young Immigrant Learners

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), young immigrant learners represent 5 percent of all school-aged youth in the United States, and nearly one in four speaks English with difficulty. Furthermore, young immigrant learners are a diverse group. Some are born in the United States, while some come from other countries. Some are at grade level and educated in their native language, while others are not. Consequently, they offer complicated educational challenges because of their differing linguistic and cultural proficiency levels in their native languages as well as in English. With these considerations in mind, how do we effectively educate this growing group of learners in our schools? In particular, how do we effectively develop their academic literacy? The purpose of the study is threefold: 1) to identify the academic literacy needs of young immigrant learners, 2) to identify and categorize the pedagogical strategies the teachers used for meeting these needs and the underlying second language acquisition, literacy, educational theories, and 3) to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of these strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Dramatically changing demographics across the United States pose a significant challenge for today's school systems. Our K-12 teachers are being called upon to work with growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students enrolled in their classrooms, or, as Kramsh (2008) notes, "... to operate in a globalized space where ... exchanges will be increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural" (p. 390). Consequently, teachers "... need to be aware of ways in which such diversity will affect how they develop their ... teaching skills within a particular context, and what this means for the belief systems and knowledge base they hold" (Gearon, 2009, p. 199).

In the last ten years, the culturally and linguistically diverse population in U.S. public schools has grown 65% and continues to grow. In 2005, over 5 million K-12 students in the U.S. did not speak English as their native language; by 2007, the number rose to over 11 million. Immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), young immigrant learners represent 5 percent of all school-aged youth in the United States, and nearly one in four speaks English with difficulty.

In the state of Pennsylvania alone, over 170 different first languages are represented by young immigrant learners in the PK-12 context. In addition, young immigrant learners are a diverse group. For example, most are born in the United States; some come from other countries. Moreover, they offer complex educational challenges because of their differing proficiency levels in their native languages as well as in English. Some are at grade level and are highly educated in their native language; others are not. Some, even though they are born in the U.S., return to their native countries to complete parts of their initial schooling. Furthermore, whether measured by state tests required under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or by the National Assessment of Edu-

cational Progress, young immigrant learners lag far behind their fluent native English-speaking peers in academic literacy proficiency (*Education Week*, 2009). Indeed, it is critical to understand this learner population and to prepare our teachers, so that we can know how to most effectively help them learn academic literacy and succeed in school.

BACKGROUND

Characteristics of Academic Literacy

For young immigrant learners, developing academic literacy can be a difficult task because they do not necessarily understand what it is. Traditionally, academic literacy has been defined as "the ability to read and write and compute in the form taught and expected in formal education" (Ogbu, 1990). For many years, this particular definition of literacy has been upheld in school curricula. With the influence the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has on the PK-12 curriculum, academic literacy is still predominantly defined within this context as nothing more than the ability to read and write. Many researchers of academic literacy have recognized this definition as being too narrow, and recent research has extended the definition by examining other characteristics of it.

Literacy Domains

Scribner and Cole (1981) were the first researchers to introduce the concept of literacy domain to the perspective of literacy. They discovered through their research that there is not just a literacy, but also many forms of it that are present in and across different domains of literacy events and practices. Scribner and Cole studied the Vai people from Liberia who invented an original writing system out-of-school, which was different from school literacy, and showed the researchers how different literacy events and practices in different domains,

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