

The Secret Weapons for Effective English Language Development in Elementary Schools

By Hannah Cho, Doug Gilbert, Michiko Lynn Powers, Hiroshi Sasaki

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Denise Pope

Stanford University

Introduction

The United States K-6 education population grows at an alarmingly high rate. A primary reason for this increase is the influx of immigrants to the United States (Ralph and Rubinson, 1980). The ELD (English Language Development) students are one of the largest groups that is served or perhaps underserved in the public education sector.

Our team of qualitative researchers set out to find the strongest curriculum for this group of learners, but instead we found evidence that supported the best practices for ELD programs. We discovered that the secret weapons to assisting ELD learners are to assure that they have passionate teachers who are using specific educational strategies with parental support and peer interaction to help students acquire English. We found that the secret weapons are not so secret: *Caring teachers who use proven strategies.*

Methods

We understand that this is a sensitive topic, especially among teachers. Some believe that ELD instruction, specifically linguistic knowledge, should be combined to design a comprehensive approach (Fillmore and Snow, 2002). Others believe that the background and exposure to cultural diversity underlie positive ESL-related attitudes among mainstream teachers (Youngs, 2001). We took these considerations into account when formulating our conclusions.

In order to address the problem of ideal language instruction in elementary schools, our team observed a one-hour ELD class in school # 23 in the Palo Alto school district. The ELD class is a beginner class that consists of four students: Lev from Russia and Young from Korea who are in the fourth grade and Jonathan from Belgium and Christina from Spain who are in the second grade.

The English proficiency levels of all prospective ELD learners are assessed at the beginning of the school year, and students are placed in the appropriate ELD level based on the assessment. Our subjects were all considered to be ELD level one. The students in the ELD class are removed from their mainstream class a few times a week to work on their language development.

We chose our site because it had a long history of ELD instruction. The population of school #23 is very diverse with children attending the school from all over the world. We also knew that the school included students with different language levels and different native tongues.

From this observation, our team transcribed our interviews to assist in gathering information. We then met as a team to discuss our observations and help guide us in

designing appropriate interview questions. Interview questions were constructed to examine the ideal learning situation for ELD students as opposed to the original questions on the ideal ELD curriculum.

Another source of evidence for our qualitative analysis included two one-hour interviews with the teacher, Mrs. Sullivan. One of these interviews took place after school in her ELD classroom, while the other took place during school in an unoccupied speech room. In between interviews we met as a group to sharpen up our questions and to key in on important points that we identified during our observation and first interview. Therefore, triangulation and member checks occurred during many points of our information gathering including our observations, interviews, research and discussions.

We must declare that our enthusiasm for this topic came with a distinct bias. Three out of four members of our research team were second language learners while the fourth had experience in teaching ELD students. We gained access to this site because one of our members has a son who is a student in the ELD program at school #23. Our backgrounds assisted us in understanding the viewpoints of our subjects, but upon acknowledgement we were able to monitor our subjectivity. It must also be noted here that a fictitious character named Ms. Smith was created in our report to show the contrast between the teacher we examined and others that Mrs. Sullivan discussed. We decided to do this not to undermine our information gathering methods but to help the reader identify with specific teachers or certain aspects of their teaching.

Findings

Secret Weapon #1 TPR

Through our research we found some effective teaching methods in ELD learning settings during our classroom observation and interview process. One of the most impressive teaching methods we found was the utilization of TPR (Total Physical Response). TPR is a language learning method based on the coordination of speech and action. It is linked to the trace theory of memory, which holds that the more often or intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the memory will be (Asher, 1982).

When the teachers have “language-body conversations” with their students, the teacher instructs and the student physically responds to these discussions. This type of interactive activity is not seen in Ms. Smith class. She often asks her students to repeat just what she states. On the other hand, we found Mrs. Sullivan was focusing on asking her students for physical responses and not just asking them to repeat what she said. She mentioned the following in her interview:

“As we are walking, we are flying, we are waving, we are skipping, we are jumping. Because those are the things that they learn first. Up, down, front, back. The prepositions: in, out. Then I give them cards. Where is the girl and a chair? In front of the chair? Behind the chair? Right of the chair? On the chair? I have a lot of those pictures and pretty soon they say, “in, on, off!””

We also observed her using illustration cards to assist the children in the physical response. Furthermore, students constructed miniature cardboard houses that displayed room layout in detail to teach her students the various name of objects that can be found in a typical home.

James Asher claims the importance of observing actions:

“The infant first deciphers the meaning of language in the right hemisphere in association with observed actions [...] Therefore, it seems clear that a logical starting point for any instructional program that intends to teach another language is to structure the content especially for the right hemisphere” (Asher, 1982).

Mrs. Sullivan also emphasizes the importance of association between the natural environment and personal experience of her students. Therefore she uses examples in order to derive a natural response from her students. The use of TPR also grabs the attention of her students and provides enjoyment from learning.

Secret Weapon #2 Technology

Additionally, using technology in this language-learning environment seemed quite effective as an ELD teaching method. Technology, in this case, includes any kind of multimedia, such as audiotapes, CDs, videotapes, learning games, and digital learning tools.

Ms. Smith tends to use an audiotape with recorded songs in her classroom. Her students often sing along with the tape and appear to enjoy the activity. She does not utilize any other forms of technology in her classroom. On the other hand, we observed Mrs. Sullivan using books on tape to help her students with difficult reading materials. She believes that listening is the most important skill in an ELD learning setting, so she focuses on listening comprehension training in her classroom:

“We have books on tape for the difficult books. Like in a classroom the kids are reading a novel, and some of kids have difficulties. They can speak English and they can hear it. But they can’t read it well. So we have tapes that they can borrow with books so that they can hear it.”

She uses audiotapes effectively based on her strategy with a particular emphasis on listening skills. She fruitfully takes on visual learning methods as well. She shows a video explaining a book to her students before they read it. This helps her students understand the framework of the book beforehand. The use of audio and video assists in the English learning process in her classroom. Some experts claim that instruction that utilizes technology has great potential to enhance student achievement.

“The effectiveness of educational technology on student learning depends not only on what outcomes are targeted and how the technology is integrated into instruction, but also on how teachers assess student performance in classrooms and adjust instruction accordingly” (Honey et al. 1999).

As mentioned above, we discovered technology as an effective method in the ELD learning environment.

Secret Weapon #3 Parental Support

It is beneficial to encourage ELD learners to watch visual aids such as videos and educational TV programs at home in order to help them improve their English skills. Mrs. Sullivan understands the benefit of utilizing videos and TV programs for language learning at home. Therefore, she gives the parents of the ELD students a list of videos and TV programs that she recommends her students to watch at home. The recommended videos on her list are well sorted out based on the students' current English proficiency level. In this way she is relying on parents to supplement her in-class efforts.

“I have some videos and I tell parents that I recommend them. Some videos might be too difficult, depending on the level of your child... And the parents have told me that watching TV programs have been really great for the kids... you know, the learning channels.”

Mrs. Sullivan also advises the parents who have a strong accent when speaking English not to speak to their children in English at home. She explains that it is counterproductive for students to learn inappropriate pronunciation from their parents at home.

“If the parents have a foreign accent when they speak English, it can easily transfer to their children. This will negatively affect the children’s English learning. There is a risk that the students will end up learning the wrong pronunciation from their parents and might require the speech teacher to correct it.”

Mrs. Sullivan says that if the parents still want to support their children’s English learning, there is a great way to do so. She believes they can assist their children in improving their English reading skills. Once some proficiency in English is achieved, voluntary reading in English is a clear route to English literacy and the development of academic English (Krashen, 1997). Mrs. Sullivan echoes this point.

“The teacher will always send books home. So, you know, children have to be reading. So, in that sense you’ll be helping your child. They read and if they don’t know the word, you will have to help them.”

Mrs. Sullivan believes that parents can actively get involved in their children’s learning process by stepping in to help them understand new words and increase their vocabulary, when they encounter unfamiliar words or terms in their homework or reading materials at home.

It is important to keep parents actively involved with the ELD program and to ensure that they also have a positive experience (Delgado-Gaitan,1991). In order to connect with parents, Mrs. Sullivan provides them with an opportunity to sit in her class. Her “open house with parents toward the end of the year” provides parents with an opportunity to see how their children are doing in class and to experience how the class is

structured and conducted. It also encourages parents to get involved in their children's English learning by allowing them to get hands-on experience of the class and gain personal connection with Mrs. Sullivan.

Parental support plays an important role in the ELD learners' improvement; parents can provide their children with access to appropriate visual tools such as TV programs and videos. Parents can also help their children improve their English reading skills and increase their vocabulary at home. We have found that parents need to be informed about what to do and what not to do in terms of helping their children with their English so that they do not end up interfering with the on-going learning process of the ELD class. We also noticed that it is essential for ELD teachers to have open lines of communication with parents so that the parents can contribute support outside of the classroom while giving constructive feedback to the ELD teachers.

Secret Weapon #4 Friendship

From our observations, we noticed that there were significant differences in the English proficiency level of each of the four ELD learners. For example, in the ELD class the ELD teacher asked the students to introduce themselves to the researchers. Although Lev and Young are in the same grade and started the ELD class at the same time, Lev was able to introduce himself more smoothly than Young. Lev spoke confidently making few mistakes, whereas Young needed more time to finish his introduction because he struggled with just pronouncing his full name. Lev, who was sitting right next to Young, tried to help him by whispering him instructions. We also noticed that when each student was asked by the ELD teacher to write an appropriate

word for a certain season on the white board, Lev was able to figure out the answer much quicker than the other ELD learners. Moreover, Lev was trying to help others by suggesting to them what to write on the white board.

Considering the fact that they started out at the same English skill level, we were curious about the differences in each student's ability to improve upon their English. There are a number of factors that attribute to the individual differences including a student's own personality and literacy level in his/her mother tongue. Mrs. Sullivan articulates,

“If you are sociable and outgoing, it's natural for you to pick up the language much faster, and if you are literate in your own home language, it transfers.”

She maintains that playing with native English speakers assists ELD learners to improve their English fast. When they play with their friends, they are highly motivated to communicate with them in English. Likewise, the frequency of daily exposure with other native speakers of English plays a significant role. According to her, after school programs create an effective learning environment for ELD learners providing them plenty of opportunities to interact with English speakers in English through play. She emphasizes the importance of friendship and effectiveness of playing; therefore, she supports having her students enrolled in these programs.

“This is why I encourage parents to have them in after school Programs. Because just playing with other children...this is a natural way of acquiring a language. Especially the little ones. If they go to after school programs, they are playing and using the language, so it's quick.”

Interaction does not have to be limited to after school programs according to Mrs. Sullivan. She says that ELD learners can also practice their English “in the neighborhood, if there are children... playing outside.”

Effective English learning can take place anywhere from the school grounds to their own neighborhoods where they can mingle and play together with other children and use English in real life situations. These interactions help ELD students acquire new vocabulary and understand its appropriate context.

Secret Weapon #5 Passion

We discovered another unique secret weapon that Mrs. Sullivan utilizes in her class. It is something that has been embedded in her heart for a long time and still plays a key role in sustaining her as an effective ELD instructor. It is her ability to cultivate the passion for learning in her students. According to S.J. Zehm, and J.A. Kottler,

“passionately committed teachers are those who absolutely love what they do. They are constantly searching for more effective ways to reach their children, to master the content and methods of their craft. They feel a personal mission...to learning as much as they can about the world, about others, about themselves – and helping others to do the same” (Zehm and Kottler, 1993, p.118).

Ms. Smith is not interested in language learning. She is familiar with Spanish and thinks that having knowledge of one foreign language is enough to teach ELD students. She feels she can not afford to attend workshops, conferences or teacher’s meetings to enhance her learning due to her time constraints.

Mrs. Sullivan in contrast, understands the experiences of second language learners and constantly tries to expose herself to new learning environments. She was born in Hawaii as a second generation Japanese immigrant. Being a second-generation immigrant, she was naturally exposed to a multilingual environment where she found her interest in language. She understands five languages, and believes that continuous learning assists her with ELD instruction.

“Teachers never stop learning, like technology, everyday it’s changing and you need to keep up! I have to be aware of where we are. By attending workshops, conferences and teachers’ meeting, I update my curriculum, I keep taking language courses myself to see how I learn, and watch other people in my class to see how do they learn...why, what methodology the teachers are using, what I can do to improve myself... and I still go to a Italian class at night.”

As a result of her own continuous education, she has created effective learning tools for her students. She showed us her own handmade language board games. She realized that playing games motivates her students the most and she has been making board games to make the learning experience fun and interesting. The board games we saw during the first interview included elements such as animals, houses, body parts, and directions.

She also strongly believes that occasional communication with her students in their native languages makes them feel at home. This is one of the reasons why she has been learning so many foreign languages.

“To be able to better communicate with my students, I am always asking them, “how do you say it in your own language?” Like when I am teaching the song, “Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter” I try to sing it in other languages too. So I have language notes of all the different languages as I pick up words. The children feel very comfortable when they are able to hear their own languages.”

She not only has passion for language acquisition and learning itself, but also most importantly, passion to be with her students.

“all effective teachers have a passion for their subject, a passion for their pupils and a passionate belief that who they are and how they teach can make a difference in their pupil’s lives, both in the moment of teaching and in the days, weeks, months and even years afterwards...For teachers who care, the student as a person is as important as the student as a learner. That respect for person-hood is likely to result in greater motivation to learn.....effective teachers display in everyday social interactions – listening to what students say, being close rather than distant, having a good sense of playfulness, humor, encouraging students to learn in different way” (Day, 2004, p.11~12).

Ms. Smith appears to want to transfer to a middle school or high school so that she can teach older students. Ms. Smith often gets frustrated with her younger students

because they do not seem to understand certain things and require a lot of repetitive instruction. Mrs. Sullivan, on the other hand, loves working with children. She thinks that working with children is rewarding, as she is able to see explicit progress. She even takes extra time to spend with her students.

“Oh, I love working with children. You know, you can’t be in the business here without the love for children. It’s fun. Actual teaching and working with kids, seeing how they progress from one level to the next, for me, it’s fun. I sometimes bring students in, like at the lunchtime and ask them, “OK, tell me what’s going on that you didn’t understand in the classroom. Let’s go over division if you are having problems with that.”

It is this quality time that allows the students to feel comfortable and have more exposure to language learning.

She believes that spending sufficient time with students and providing repetitive instruction over and over until students understand the contents of the instruction are important.

“It would be nice if the teachers are aware of this and ask the students that didn’t understand the contents of the study to come to the back table to go over again. I believe that’s just good teaching for the whole class. In that way, some children who weren’t able to understand it the first time can hear it again for the second time. I don’t know how much is going on in the classroom for the second language learners. One thing that I always feel teachers need to know when they are teaching second language learners is thinking of yourself learning in a new language. The first time you hear it, it’s not there. It needs to be repeated in order to be fully understood. Each time we repeat the lesson to make sure that it’s fully understood and that’s why we try a lot of different things to help them understand better.”

The above quotation from Mrs. Sullivan demonstrates her passion for teaching ELD students. This passion is reflected in the way she makes herself available to her students. It also helps her improve her methods and teaching techniques. As researchers, we understand that not every teacher possesses this passion, but it can be identified as a strong force for ELD development.

Conclusion

With the growing population in the United States of second language learners, ELD instruction has become a strong focus in elementary schools. As researchers we understand that it may be difficult to implement all five of the above-mentioned “secret weapons.” Economic limitations, cultural barriers, testing requirements, and political infrastructure may influence the integration of these models into ELD instruction. It must be recognized that ELD teachers are not the only ones that need to integrate these strategies and passion into their daily classrooms. All teachers, administrators, and members of the school community must embrace the power of the above-mentioned “secret weapons” in order to put ELD learners in a position to succeed. By implementing TPR strategies, utilizing technology, relying on parental support and peer interaction, and embracing the passion of teachers, our educational system as a whole can make great strides for ELD learners. Therefore, the weapons are not so secret and must be utilized in order to win the battle for ELD students.

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