Costello, Megan: Helping ESL students navigate US public schools: theories versus practice

Research Proposal

The population of the United States is becoming more and more ethnically diverse with each passing year. This means that today's classrooms look very different than they did a few years ago. Elementary school teachers are now often faced with several students in their classes who do not speak English. The question becomes how to get past the language barrier to help children communicate and learn the linguistics of the English language.

The goal of my ethnographic video will be to report the success and struggles that elementary school students who are from non English speaking countries face when entering the public elementary school in America. To do this I will survey, interview and discuss with professionals and up and coming teachers at the elementary and high school level to discuss their ideology and determine how and by what methods they use to communicate with English as a second language (ESL) learners. I also would like to discover what struggles they encounter.

The interview and survey questions will focus on such things as what programs are offered to ESL children, what do they do to support them in making friends and how do they handle the stress put on students of not being able to speak English. These are all things that are common difficulties of students who enter the United States as non-English speakers according to Ernst (1994).

In addition, I will interview and survey an ESL teacher to discuss with him the differences between what educational theories say and how it actually plays out in the day-to-day classroom (Olivo, 2003).

Resources Cited

Ernst, G.


Olivo, W.


Scholarly Background on ESL Theory vs. Practice

Background

ESL classrooms have evolved and changed over the years as students and school populations have changed. More and more children are entering the educational system from other countries. These students speak a variety of languages and it is the task of teachers to help them adjust. Not only do they need to learn a brand new language, teachers need to be sensitive to students cultures, traditions and practices.

Past practices in schools have focused on students being passive learners while the teacher was active in lecturing and presenting information (Olivo, Warren). Some experts in the field of educating ESL students believe that the shift from passive learners to learners who are more engaged is a good one. However, they advise that it is not practical to completely throw the old ideas and practices. They feel that there should just be an expansion off old ideas to make the classroom and ideal learning environment (Britto, Rory).

Theories

Teaching students with different cultural backgrounds who are non English speaking can be very difficult. Therefore, there are many methods and strategies that teachers use to help students adjust to their new country and learn the language. Some methods utilized in classrooms include the direct method, grammar translation communication language teaching, and audio-lingual method (Abbasi, Malik Abdul).

The direct method, also known as the the natural method, is one in which there is no translation (Abbasi, Malik Abdul). All lessons and conversations are done in English. Sometimes objects are used with this method to assist the student. The theory with this method is that the English language learner should experience the language in much the same way as he or she did when learner their native language as a baby.

The grammar translation method is the reading and appreciating grammar of English language. It is based on the written word and was originally used to teach Greek and Latin. In this method, students learn grammar rules and then apply those rules to the translation of sentences.

The audio-lingual method uses repetition, drills and patterns. It was a method that was born as a result of World War II when informants were needed in the military. This method asks students to repeat words, phrases and sentences. Students are taught skills in English only, similar to the direct method. In this method skills are taught in sequence and visual aids are utilized (Kerper Mora, Jill).

Most experts believe that teaching one approach only is not beneficial. English should be taught using a multi-approach method (Hopkins, Megan & Martinez-Wenzi, Mary & Aldana, Ursula and Gandara, Patricia). It is further recommended that the teacher use the approach of initiating, responding and, finally, evaluating (Olivo, Warren). The evaluation can be in the form of benchmarks. The use of benchmarks is a way for teachers to see where student strengths and weaknesses are and instruction can be differentiated and adjusted (Alamos, Melvyn).

Practice

The best way for students to become fluent English speakers is by a lot of practice. Students in the classroom become good speakers if they are in a classroom, have high motivation, and are given many opportunities to speak and listen to English (Abbasi, Malik Abdulf). Therefore, teachers should take into consideration and utilize the three major approaches discussed, but they should focus on using English during their instruction (Alamos, Melvyn).
One popular approach teachers can use is “parroting” where students repeat what is being said to them. This helps students in two ways. First, students can tell if they are exhibiting improper sentence use (McCarty, Teresa & Collins, James and Hopson, Rodney). Also, students are able to self-regulate. It is important for students to self-regulate as it will allow for the attainment of a higher level of learning (Kirmizi, Ozkan).

In many public schools, teachers continue to apply older strategies. For example, a teaching method typically used is skill-based worksheets. This is not the best approach for English learners and they even pose serious issues in helping students improve their English skills (Ernst, Gisela).

There are many new ideas and advanced strategies that can be used for more efficient learning (Abbasi, Malik Abdul). For example, students have found it helpful when teachers make videos accessible to them. Video lessons help English learners understand the lesson more in depth and they can watch it multiple times if they need further clarification or if they are confused (McAlpine, Dave and Dhonau, Stephanie).

Another place for students to learn besides a general education setting, is the ESL classroom. ESL classrooms have been thought to be a more comfortable place for the children to be themselves. They can work at their own levels in an ESL classroom setting with other students who are learning English (Nozaki, Yoshiko). It is important for the ESL teacher and classroom teacher to frequently communicate and collaborate regarding their beliefs and practices so that the best possible outcome can be reached for students (Razor, Aria).

Coming to a new country is a frightening experience for children, especially when they do not understand the language. It is the responsibility of educators to help ease the transition so that the best possible outcome can be achieved.

Survey of a High School ENL Teacher:

Which languages are you fluent in?

I speak very poor Spanish. So I truly understand what my students’ struggle is like.

What are some theories you were taught to help with kids who speak other languages?

We were taught about BICS and CALPS. BICS is an abbreviation for basic social English. (survival language) The students always learn the survival language first. For instance, where is the bathroom? How are you? They also pick this up quickly because they are speaking with peers. Students may take up to 6 months of a silent period before they feel comfortable speaking. CALPS is the academic language. This could take up to 7 years to master.

What are some theories you were taught on how to help teachers interact with ESL students if they are only fluent in English?

We were taught to use realia. Realia is real life manipulatives. For example, if you are teaching about measuring you would present a measuring cup, measuring spoons. You need to provide real life experience. So if the unit is measuring the students should then measure ingredients and make a recipe. Another helpful strategy is to use pictures, hand gestures and word to word glossaries.

How do you manage a classroom of students who speak different languages?

I always encourage them to speak in the language they are comfortable so they feel safe. That goes for writing as well. Its important to build trust. Once that is established the students will feel comfortable speaking in English. I do all lessons in English. The ENL (English as A NEW Language) strategies help the students to understand. I regularly check for understanding through graphic organizers and allowing them to speak.

What are important qualities of an ENL teacher?

Open-minded!!!! welcoming, well-traveled or least understanding of the world outside your town.

How would you rate your ENL lesson planning abilities?

I feel confident with my ability to plan a lesson. I differentiate for all levels. This way I know I’m meeting all their needs.

How do you maintain discipline in class?

You have to build a routine the students learn to follow. With routine their little time to fall out of place. I also create expectations of the class and they must agree to them.

What are five factors you put into lesson planning?

Mini-lesson (what I want them to learn)
Model- (show them what it should look like)
Independent -- (students try it on their own)
Conclusion- (students come back and share their findings)
Assessment- (students prove their understanding)

As well, I surveyed an Elementary ESL teacher with some of the similar questions, there will be more on him in the video I will present.

**I have surveyed seven elementary school teachers. A compilation of their answers are below.**

**What grade levels have you taught involving ESL students?**
- Kindergarten through 5th grade
- Special Education
- Academic Intervention support

**Do you have any background in any other languages?**
- Little to no background
- Two professionals could speak enough Spanish to communicate

**If so, would you say communicating with the student was natural?**
- Teachers reported that the Spanish backgrounds helped understand the situation a little bit more than the teachers who just spoke English.

**What are some difficulties you ran into when disciplining the student?**
- Cultural differences
- Non English speaking parents and student speaking some English
- Lack of understanding about how an American school works

**If the student is misbehaving how did you deal with that?**
- Picture cues to explain
- Google Translate
- Hand gestures

**What tips do you have for interacting with ESL students?**
- Slow down the lesson so students can process and understand.
- Allow the student to talk about their culture and family
- Repeating the directions
- Having a buddy in the class help the student understand
- Picture cards
- Translation Apps

**References Cited:**

Ernst, G.

Olivo, W.

Nozaki, Y.

RAZFAR, A.

MCCARTY, T. L., COLLINS, J. and HOPSON, R. K.
I did deviate from my proposal, which was to focus on the students. As I began working, I discovered that it would be interesting to focus on the successes and struggles of professionals who work with ESL students. For example, the teachers I surveyed had many years of teaching experience, some over 25 years. Heider reported that the goal of ethnography is truth. I researched and gathered data with the idea of finding the truth in how teachers help ESL students assimilate into an English-speaking classroom. I used this information to create a film that gave the person watching it a thorough understanding of what it is like to teach students whose language is a barrier in the classroom. In addition, the ethnographic video I created had a point of view, which Heider states is important. The point of view I reported on was that of the professional working with ESL students.

When planning the video, I had to make some choices. I originally wanted to go into a classroom and video ESL students at work. Because of privacy laws, that was not possible. I was able to go into the school and visit the general education classroom of Brad Hughes, whom I surveyed, but not videotape. Mr. Hughes has three ESL students in his classroom. While there, I saw some of the techniques discussed in the ethnography film such as small group work and technology. Students were working with a teacher and working independently during ELA. While working independently, they were using a Chromebook. By observing in the classroom, I was practicing context enrichment, which was a modality reported on by Peter Loizos in his article Admissible Evidence. Loizos talks about using the process of inquiry. When in the classroom, I was able to gain first-hand knowledge of how professionals help ESL students.

I decided the best approach would be to video a written ethnography in a classroom setting. As in Asch and Asch's article on Ethnographic Film, this video was a single concept film, having one subject. The video was content based with facts and tips from a professional who has worked for many years in the field. The subject matter was conveyed quite successfully. It was a bit difficult to see what was written on the whiteboard, however, since the speaker also told what she was writing; I think it worked out fine. The video had more detailed information than the written component. Is this respect, I think it was better. The video gave suggestions and tips just as the written component; however, it incorporated such things as tips for what to think about when planning lessons whereas the written portion did not do that.