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Comprehensible input for elementary instruction

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Abstract

In the United States, more and more multi-ethnic linguistic populations will be entering school systems: The increasing need for helping these students from other cultures who know little or no English has become more and more apparent. Educators should modify their curricula and/or teaching strategies to improve English language learners (ELLs) ability in the use of English. Teachers help ELLs connect form (word) and meaning (concepts) and tie these to prior knowledge by providing understandable meaning, that is comprehensible input. Comprehensible input applies new words/sentences to old concepts. Vocabulary learning usually grows out of social interaction and talking personally to people, or basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). When ELLs have more opportunities to have social interaction in class using their new language, they reinforce what they are learning and become more confident. When ELLs socially interact with classmates, teachers, school staff, janitors, and others, they can develop cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Two instructional models (the cooperative learning model and inquiry model) work very well to help ELLs learn English because the models incorporate comprehensible input; BICS, and CALP. It is important for teachers to know how to use comprehensible input to help ELLs learn English. As important, teachers need to know how to direct classmates, classroom aides, or volunteer parents, etc. to work with ELLs on assignments using comprehensible input.

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT FOR ELEMENTARY INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

In the United States, more and more multi-ethnic linguistic populations will be entering school systems. The increasing need for helping these students from other cultures who know little or no English has become more and more apparent. Educators should modify their curricula and/or teaching strategies to improve English language learners (ELLs) ability in the use of English. Teachers help ELLs connect form (word) and meaning (concepts) and tie these to prior knowledge by providing understandable meaning, that is comprehensible input. Comprehensible input applies new words/sentences to old concepts. Vocabulary learning usually grows out of social interaction and talking personally to people, or basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). When ELLs have more opportunities to have social interaction in class using their new language, they reinforce what they are learning and become more confident. When ELLs socially interact with classmates, teachers, school staff, janitors, and others, they can develop cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Two instructional models (the cooperative learning model and inquiry model) work very well to help ELLs learn English because the models incorporate comprehensible input, BICS, and CALP. It is important for teachers to know how to use comprehensible input to help ELLs learn English. As important, teachers need to know how to direct classmates, classroom aides, or volunteer parents, etc. to work with ELLs on assignments using comprehensible input.

Comprehensible Input for Elementary Instruction

A boy, Alan (not his real name), recently from Mexico, is in a third-grade class. His first language is Spanish, although he had learned to understand some English words he heard or read before he entered this classroom. At the beginning of the semester, however, he spoke no English at all in class. After two months in the class, he began to speak some English. He was motivated to improve in written as well as spoken English, but he continued to struggle with learning the language.

The above scenario is familiar to many U. S. teachers in public elementary schools. In the United States, more and more multi-ethnic linguistic populations will be entering school systems. The increasing need for helping these students from other cultures who know little or no English becomes more and more apparent. How should we as educators modify our curriculum or strategies to improve their English and help them learn?

We need to know how people learn. I am Chinese; I grew up and received most of my education in Hong Kong. Chinese is my first language, and English my second. I recall my kindergarten experience; I began learning the English language by learning the English alphabet from a Chinese teacher. I understood alphabetic letters were symbols, tools guiding me to understand how to read English.

Culture influences language; each language structure is different. As each culture is different, language structure depends on the rules of the culture for speaking and writing. Therefore, one needs to learn vocabulary and also learn how to use the vocabulary in the right way of a particular culture to create sentences that make sense. In literacy there is a written code (in English it is the alphabet) that represents the

spoken code (the phonology or sounds of a language). In a school setting, English language learners (ELLs) must learn both these codes while they are also learning how to speak the language. When ELLs come from a language that has a different code system (non-alphabetic), they need to learn the alphabet (new written code). They also need to learn how to use the new spoken code systems. When ELLs learn English, they often start with learning the alphabet first because the alphabet is the foundation tool to learn written words, sentences, and more.

In a kindergarten classroom, ELLs may not recognize the letters for “apple,” “tree,” “water,” and so on. When a teacher shows them a real apple (picture or other representations of an apple), writes the word ‘apple’ underneath, and reads the word, then the children begin to understand the connection between a written code system (alphabet) and the spoken code system (words and phonology). Students start to recognize that the letters ‘A P P L E’ mean the concept of an ‘apple.’ The previous example in which an actual apple or picture of an apple was used represents Krashen’s concept “comprehensible input” (1985), which means the receiver is able to understand the meaning from the message. The extended explanation of this concept is ‘target language’ (Gifford and Mullaney, 1997), meaning a teacher uses vocabulary s/he knows can be related to concepts learners already know, such as in the apple example. Through the use of target language, teachers help learners to connect form (words) and meaning (concepts). Based on Lee and VanPatten (1995), comprehensible input should be used effectively, which means the communicative message (the message the teacher is trying to get across) should provide true meaning (understandable meaning for the child, again in the apple example) for learners to

understand. Learning a new language is a long process, but it is important for ELLs to have the opportunity/time to go through this process. This learning process is a puzzle for ELLs, but teachers need to help ELLs put this puzzle together to make enough pieces fit for a clear picture.

Comprehensible input is an important part of that puzzle because it relates students' background experiences (say, of an apple) and applies new words/sentences to new or old concepts (old in the sense the ELLs already knew the concept apple in their first language). This input does not necessarily refer to the language; instead, the teacher can often use different materials to give second language learners clues. The materials can be the type that help the learner through visualizing (as with a picture), hearing, touching, etc.

It is important for teachers to use stimulating materials to tie comprehensible input to ELLs' prior knowledge; but first the teacher needs to survey their prior knowledge. In surveying, teachers can interview family members (sometimes using translators) during parent-teacher conferences to find out family, regional and national language backgrounds; and years of English learning ELLs have experienced, etc. Based upon this information the teacher can then explore and find comprehensible input that may be familiar to ELLs so they can learn the English language more easily.

This prior knowledge is important to help ELLs learn the new language. In addition, ELLs gain prior knowledge through the process of learning itself. The role of the teacher is to determine how much experience she needs to provide ELLs to give the prior knowledge they need.

As pointed out, ELLs start learning the vocabulary of how the language works through things they already know. Initial vocabulary instruction usually focuses on social interaction and talking personally to people, or interpersonal communication. When ELLs have a lot of opportunities to have social interaction in class using their new language, they reinforce what they have learned and become more confident. If they have not experienced excessive negative inputs, ELLs are usually willing to take more risks and explore more content. Social interaction represents communication that is personal or social and has a great amount of context, like, "Hi, how are you?"

Even though the new words ELLs study at the beginning may not make sense to them, with repetition, the words become familiar and ELLs know those new words can be used under certain circumstances. For example, when ELLs and native speakers are asked to create bulletin boards together to reinforce units, ELLs through this interactive creating process will better come to understand the specific unit. Another example, when ELLs and native speakers are learning the sense of taste (salt, candy, lemons, etc.), native speakers can help ELLs distinguish the different tastes. These social experiences with their teacher and native speaking peers use basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1985).

BICS are an essential means to learn English. But, social talking is not academic language. To get to that complex language requires a deeper understanding of English. However, ELLs need first to practice basic social language. Then, they can move into the harder, more complex academic language. They need social language in academic settings to help them with academic vocabulary and academic content. They need a lot of comprehensible input, a lot of visual help, and hearing,

and touching, and kinesthetic help and other ways to stimulate their senses to grasp more complex concepts. Being able to speak about and understand more complex concepts is called cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1985).

CALP is the academic language students need in school. It involves subject-matter information (Krashen, 1985). But it takes several years to go from learning BICS to learning CALP. BICS require less time and experience (one or two years) than CALP (five or more years) to develop to native-like levels (Christian, 1995; Renton, 1998). Krashen & Tarrell (1983) state because ELLs continuously receive comprehensible input in and outside of the classroom, in the long run, ELLs will improve their accuracy in their BICs and CALP speech.

CALP is the language of content areas. When ELLs are first learning to speak English, they are speaking very few words and need a lot of context to help, and the same is true of reading and writing. When they first learn to read and write English, they need lots of comprehensible input, lots of context, picture help but few new words for them to be able to read and write. Too many new words will overwhelm them. They read and write very much like they already speak. Then, ELLs become more sophisticated and more complex. When they have more experience, they can develop the more complex (or academic) ability.

Looking back at the scenario in the first paragraph, Alan speaks more English today compared to two months ago. Everyday in school, even though he does not know much English, the surrounding environment is full of English speaking people: classmates, teachers, school staff, janitors, and others. He is immersed in English.

He is “un-intentionally” learning English by being continuously immersed in a rich English environment. However, this can be extremely overwhelming for him at times unless the environment also provides a great deal of context for speaking, a great deal of comprehensible input. Everyday in school, he attends classes with his classmates. However, in some of the instruction, he receives extra help from an assistant, Mrs. Brown (not her real name). She helps Alan build his vocabulary by using pictures to assist him in his learning. Sometimes, she may use other forms of comprehensible input, such as hand signals or actual objects to show the meaning.

Mrs. Weinstein (not her real name), Alan’s classroom teacher, pays more attention to him when he needs help with class work. She uses examples to help him understand different words and meanings. She will model (say, draw a car on the board) how to do certain activities, so Alan can “see” the process in action. She may also ask a classmate, classroom aide, or volunteer parent to work with Alan on an assignment using comprehensible input.

In the process of on-going experiences, social interactions occupy a majority of Alan’s school time. For instance, he notices when one classmate helps another classmate do something, the one being helped will say “thank you.” Then, Alan may relate to himself that when someone gives him help, he will say “thank you” to that person. In this situation, Alan realizes that to say “thank you” is a polite way to show appreciation of the person who has given help. He may not know how to read or spell “thank you,” but he recognizes the words when he hears them.

The previous portion tells how comprehensible input works for ELLs. As mentioned earlier, ELLs’ interpersonal communication comes prior to academic

success. In the following section, several different strategies will be explained that can be used to provide comprehensible input during the learning process.

The ELLs' English language development is not that much different than when native speakers developed their first language. Through the surrounding atmosphere of social interaction, a one-year old child starts to say single words, then a couple of words, then a simple sentence, and then a complex sentence. Trawick-Smith (2000) points out even though a baby says a word, it does not mean he or she actually understands the full meaning. Cox & Boyd-Batstone (1997) explain that children can gain meaningful messages from a communication, as they learn their first language. They pick up the first language naturally, not through formal teaching. The child's experience includes the overall experience of what is happening in his/her life. He may see his parents' reading him a story about pizza. He may see other children playing and giggling in fun conversations as they eat pizza. He may see a pizza-delivering car deliver a pizza. That's how he learns the word, "Pizza." The child can speak the word, "Pizza," but this does not mean s/he understands what the word means. However, through much experience with pizza in various contexts, the child gradually understands the full adult meaning of the word, "pizza" (Trawick-Smith, 2000). Prior to knowing how to read the word "pizza," young children understand the meaning of the spoken word "pizza" (O'Donnell & Wood, 1999).

Non-native ELLs face a similar situation when learning language through social interaction: one word, a couple of words, a simple sentence, and a complex sentence. ELLs learn from the rich environment. All the experiences (visual, hearing, touching, kinesthetic) give them the learning opportunities to know and learn

English. Renton (1998) gives an example of ELLs being exposed to the language constantly in a natural classroom setting. ELLs have people to communicate with and things to talk about, opportunities to connect English labels and expressions to what they already know in their own language. For instance, Alan also connected English labels and expressions to what he already knew in Spanish as when he pronounced China as Chee na (Spanish) instead of China (English). Encouragement helps non-native ELLs learn and build their confidence. One of our major roles as educators is to motivate students to be interested in learning. Learning is a process. We cannot expect a native speaking one-year old child to learn how to speak fluently overnight. And, neither can we expect this of Alan, a non-native ELL.

Two instructional models work very well to help ELLs. They are the cooperative learning model and the inquiry model. These two models involve lots of social interaction and social context. At the same time, the models promote academic learning.

Cooperative Learning Model

The cooperative learning model requires lots of social skills. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec (1993) define five characteristics of cooperative group learning. They are positive interdependence, individual accountability, cooperative skills, face-to-face interaction, and group reflection and goal setting. **Positive interdependence is promoted** when each group member has an individual task to share the role, reward and resource with group mates in order to accomplish a goal together.

Individual accountability occurs when each individual has his/her own

responsibility to assist the whole group to reach the goal. **Cooperative skills** are promoted when students need to transfer familiar messages to one another, listen carefully, and share ideas with other teammates in order to understand the group goal and expectation. Since the cooperative learning activity often uses discussions, negotiations, and decisions, **face-to-face interaction** is highly promoted. When students engage in cooperative activities, students' successes will be based on their engaged **reflections to achieve the group goal**. In the cooperative group, students gain satisfaction when teammates succeed (Putnam, 1997). Cooperative learning assures all students have equal opportunity for success (Slavin, 1990).

Each member in the cooperative group makes sure others in the group understand what the whole group is doing and processes the ideas and information before they can move forward. Therefore, teammates will try using different alternatives of objects or demonstrations to simplify and clarify the explanation. They will reinforce the student who needs comprehensible input to understand the message and information.

In this cooperative approach, both native English speakers and non-native English Language learners gain benefits. When the native speaker tries to explain the idea or information, s/he is in the process of searching for a way to explain better (use more comprehensible input) and be more precise to make the explanation clear. The ELL will attempt to understand the meaning of the native speaker who is explaining to him/her through the interaction of learning. If one returns to Alan's scenario, if he does not understand his teammate's explanation, he will ask for more clarification, and teammates will gladly help Alan because the whole team wants to succeed. Thus,

through the process of cooperative learning, the teacher must highly emphasize social skills.

A teacher's role is to observe how students explain and to intervene when difficulties arise. In the cooperative learning approach, the teacher will give cues and suggestions for how to explain as well as how to understand. The more opportunities for social interactions ELLs have, the more chances for them to be involved in learning and to improve CALP as well as BICS (Gifford & Mullaney, 1999).

Inquiry Model

Gunter, Estes, & Schwab (1999) summarize the Suchman's Inquiry Model into seven different steps. These steps include: 1) select a problem and conduct research, 2) introduce the process and problem, 3) gather data, 4) develop a theory and verify, 5) state the rules and explain the theory, 6) analyze the process, and 7) evaluate. The teacher first selects a mystery situation or problem that will interest and stimulate students to find an answer as they search for possible solutions. Secondly, the teacher makes sure students clearly understand the process. The teacher can only provide yes or no answers to students' questions. Third, while students are using different questions to investigate the teacher's yes or no answers, they are gathering data to figure out the possible answers. When the data relates to the theory, the pieces of information seem to make sense to the theory, students are developing a theory and achieving the verification step. In this process, students will discuss whether the theory is workable or not. If students accept the theory and believe it is verifiable, they will need to state the rules and explain the theory with values that are

predictable. This involves the fifth step. In the step to analyze the process, students need to rehearse the process and discuss how to improve it. The final step is to evaluate whether all students in the group understand the theory and can apply the rules to other situations. The problem solving technique is the major fundamental tool that is used in this inquiry model. Students gain learning experience through discovering answers to problems. Making sure their findings have some certainty is the major goal for students using the Inquiry Model (Kameenui & Carnine, 1998).

In the Inquiry Model, learning occurs through a problem solving technique. For students limited in English proficiency, teachers can use simplified language, visual aids or other materials to connect with students' prior knowledge. Oftentimes, classmates may also have some good ideas for providing comprehensible input to their ELL classmates.

While in the inquiry process, even though ELLs may not totally understand all the conversations, they may guess some of the meaning through the interactions. The teacher's role is to give extra-help to ELLs so they can understand what they are "guessing at" that they are asked to do. Through gathering data, the student starts to realize what the basic question was about. While ELL students are trying to develop a theory and verify, and explain to the class, even though the theory may not be reported thoroughly, they are motivated to attempt. This is a good time to support them instead of telling them they are wrong, intimidating them in their attempts. In the process of analyzing, ELL students can be encouraged to explain the problem and gain improvement in understanding rather than guessing at the "real" question. Finally, in the evaluation section, the teacher can double check to see whether the

ELL really understands or needs more clarification by using further alternative ways of explaining. These inquiry processes from selecting a problem and conducting the research to the final part of evaluation involve lots of BICS. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) key idea that the actual level of development is dependent on problem solving under the adult guidance of more capable peers, the more these students have interactions with such peers, the more they learn through communication. Gifford (1999) believes ELLs' interactions with others will expand their cognitive abilities and upgrade their developmental level. In this way, they can improve their CALP level also. According to Cummins (1984), the more that children's experience is related to initial reading and writing learning, the more likely they can improve their cognitive abilities.

The previous methods are some of the best teaching examples that combine with comprehensible inputs to help ELLs improve BICS as well as CALP. Even though the improvements of BICS and CALPS progress at a different pace, the strengthening of BICS helps CALP to be improved at the same time.

No matter which teaching model the teacher is using, ELLs need to have materials/input that helps them understand the message. That means teachers can use a variety of materials, visual aids, listening, role-play, or more to aid students' learning. When students make connections with their prior knowledge, they will start to make sense of the English they are learning.

A preferable environment for ELLs to learn English will be one which encourages them to express and share their ideas and feelings. Good rapport with the teacher and students would be very helpful (Krashen & Tarrell, 1983). Then, ELL

students feel comfortable, motivated, and have confidence to learn. When ELLs feel welcomed, they are free of threats, and are willing to participate more, as well as take risks to try more challenging tasks.

The more that teachers know what things they can use in the classroom and how to use them through comprehensible input, the more benefits the ELLs will have. There are lots of resources available in the classroom. Cox and Boyd-Batstone (1997) explain Krashen's comprehensible input as including several characteristics. Teachers should let students use the language they know, give clues familiar to the students, and use clues other than language, such as gestures and expressions. Another helpful characteristic is to modify the level of language difficulty, such as repetition, paraphrasing, reducing speed of spoken language, etc. In addition, teachers should use topics that are meaningful and interesting for students, and those topics should relate to students' prior knowledge. Finally, teachers do not need to emphasize teaching grammar in sequence. Renton (1998) emphasizes how the ELLs can grasp the meaning of the whole message prior to understanding each word, and this is dependent on the degree to which they can understand. Therefore, context and content are both important. Renton explains children understand content better when the content is interesting and familiar, so that children can make connection with objects, activities, or relate to the current event. For the context, the teacher needs to create meaningful communication using aids such as illustrations, gesture, expression, posture, body language, and "children-level" teacher talk.

The following is a list of suggestions for comprehensible input for Limited English Proficient Students by Katherine McFarland (1996). (pp. 5-8)

1. Speaking/ Listening Activities—need to provide time and adequate delivery for LEP students.
 - Restate to clarify if problem in comprehension arises
 - Use repetition; restatements, and examples
 - Provide listening and speaking games
2. Contextual Clues—Provide clues to clarify the meanings of new words and ideas to aid in the visual impact of information.
 - Provide Gestures/ facial expressions
 - Use kinesthetic/ body language for emphasis
 - Use texts with visuals
 - Provide classroom labels on equipment
3. Organizers—Provide opportunities for students to graphically represent difficult academic content to be stored in long-term memory.
 - Sort/ categorize/ group information graphically
 - Use Venn Diagram for comparison and contrast
 - Use K/ W/ L –What you know/ What you want to know/ What you learn.
4. Classroom Strategies—Provide active learning opportunities that have proven to be successful.
 - Orchestrate peer tutoring opportunities
 - Model what is expected and provide examples
 - Reinforce multiple intelligence
 - Integrate songs, chants, and choral readings
5. Reading/Writing Strategies—Provide active methods to comprehend difficult

content materials through literacy.

- Preview text or unit
- Simplify the reading materials
- Provide reinforcements for concepts (hints, cue cards, visuals)

6. Study Skills—Create metacognitive strategies to be used to extract important information.

- Present alternatives to outlining—Webbing and mapping
- Audiotape lessons
- Teaching skimming and scanning techniques

7. Evaluation—Provides alternatives for grading and tracking progress of ELLs.

- Hold individual conferences
- Portfolio assessment
- Reinforce self evaluation

8. Test Modifications—Provide methods to evaluate ELLs' understanding of content knowledge.

- Open book exams
- Allow extra time for regular exams
- Read test items to student

9. General Advice—Prepares teachers to work with multi-level ELLs.

- Keep a variety of instructional games
- Find a variety of classroom activities and learning styles
- Emphasize accuracy not speed

The growing number of ELLs in United States classrooms increases teachers' awareness of the need to find ways of helping these students succeed in learning. It is important for teachers to be familiar with comprehensible input and use it often to help ELLs. Students usually improve basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) first and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) later because of their different complexity levels, but both are closely related. When comprehensible input is used well in the classroom, ELLs will more quickly shorten the language gap between themselves and native English speakers.

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