

THE KEY IS DIFFERENTIATION

Recognizing the literacy and linguistic needs of indigenous Hispanic students

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*h*ispanic English as a Second Language (ESL) students have historically been present in classrooms across the United States. However, in the last 15 to 20 years, the Hispanic student population has more than doubled. As a result, Spanish is the most widely spoken language in the United States after English.

Currently, the majority of English learners (ELs) in K–12 classrooms are Hispanic students who come from different Latin American countries. For this reason, there are many resources and studies addressing this particular population of students and suggesting pedagogical approaches to teach literacy and language acquisition from a Hispanic-student perspective.

A common trend in the studies addressing literacy instruction for Hispanic ELs is that Spanish is identified as a language of reference for literacy and language learning. Nonetheless, in the last 10 years a particular group within the Hispanic EL population has increased: the indigenous population of Hispanic EL students.

This distinct student population is a minority within a minority group that is oftentimes unvoiced and unacknowledged in the ESL literature and in our classrooms. ELs within this population do not speak Spanish as a first language, and some of them arrive to North American classrooms not speaking Spanish at all. As such, using resources and instructional practices tailored specifically for Spanish-speaking ELs may not benefit this underserved group.

What literacy practitioners need to know

New statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice show that three Mayan languages—Mam, Quiche, and Kanjobal—were among 2015’s top languages used for translation in immigration courts. Indigenous Hispanic EL students are a growing population that arrives to U.S. classrooms with academic experiences that differ from those of the average Hispanic student. As such, it is important for literacy practitioners to identify this student population and tailor didactic activities that help them become literate and learn English.

Many of these students come from an educational background where their native language (L1) was not taught beyond learning how to read and write specific vocabulary words. As a result, they are native speakers of a language they use only to communicate orally and possess limited proficiency in reading and writing. Some of these ELs attended school in their native countries, but content knowledge was only taught in Spanish. In retrospect, the writing and reading challenges encountered in their L1 is often transferred to Spanish. In addition to this, many of them have interrupted education or have never been to a formal school setting.

This particular population of ELs is extremely vulnerable and requires literacy instruction—language and numeracy—that is differentiated to their

linguistic needs, academic experiences, and reality.

Implications for literacy practitioners and administrators

It is important to understand that numeracy, reading comprehension, and writing are common areas where this EL student population needs support. When teaching numeracy, do not assume that students know the numerical sequence or how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Instead, start from the beginning and assess their skills individually in order to focus on an immediate learning goal that is realistic. When teaching basic numeracy skills, incorporate realia that students use in their everyday lives (fruits and clothespins, for example) to make meaningful connections and slowly transition from realia to plain numerical exercises.

A fun activity to teach students how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide is to use each student as a number. You can ask five students to stand on a circle on the left side and two students on the circle on the right. Between those two circles you can place a big sheet of paper with any sign (+, -, x, ÷) and then ask students to stand up on the circle after the equal sign (=) to state the answer. This is a great activity that can be used to explain the concept of the four basic operations of elementary arithmetic.

On the other hand, when teaching English, it is best to primarily focus on developing reading and writing skills. Use activities that promote the connection between text and speech; for example, use group read-alouds and dictates. These activities support word recognition and reinforce word spelling. Also, incorporate short stories that are very easy to read and include many visuals. When possible, include stories that make reference to concepts from other classes and explain those concepts using roundtable discussions, preferably with a small number of students to differentiate instruction.

It is important for administrators to learn about this population as well and work with their staff to create an academic environment that is inclusive and individualized. The best way to help this vulnerable population succeed



is to give them the opportunity to fully immerse in literacy instruction on a daily basis. Administrators have the power to allocate instructional resources and provide a schedule that is supportive and differentiated. Classes offered vary by grade level and school counties; however, these students should receive newcomer English and mathematics, AIM (Adolescent Instructional Model), and critical reading every day. In addition, students should receive a Spanish class to improve their literacy skills in the language they will use as a bridge to learn English.

Final thoughts

Educators need to be prepared to meet the literacy and language

needs of these indigenous Hispanic EL students and have knowledge about their linguistic needs enough to differentiate instruction. These students need academic support that is relevant, relatable, and realistic to their academic skills upon arrival.

Teachers and administrators need to become advocates of all EL students, especially vulnerable groups within this population. In addition, teachers and administrators need to collaborate in a language plan that supports daily immersion in literacy and language instruction for these students.

The key to learning lies in differentiation; all students can succeed when their teachers, administrators, and school personnel give them the opportunity and believe in them. ■