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Sharing the Secrets of Academic Success with Adolescent English Language Learners

by Kate Kinsella, Ph.D.

In this first part of a two-part article, Kinsella targets the problem ESL students face if they are not prepared cognitively to meet the demands of college curricula. Part two of the article, which will appear in the spring, outlines strategies teachers can use to address this problem.

San Francisco State University's "Step to College Program," a partnership with San Francisco Bay Area school districts, brings university faculty into local high schools to teach college preparatory classes to interested twelfth-grade students. The primary objective of this program is to support linguistically and culturally diverse students in advancing to higher education.

The immigrant students in the ESL section are thrilled to be enrolled in a university class and in many cases proud to be the first in their family to have access to higher education. However, many of these aspiring college students are unprepared for the core curricular demands of twelfth grade, let alone the

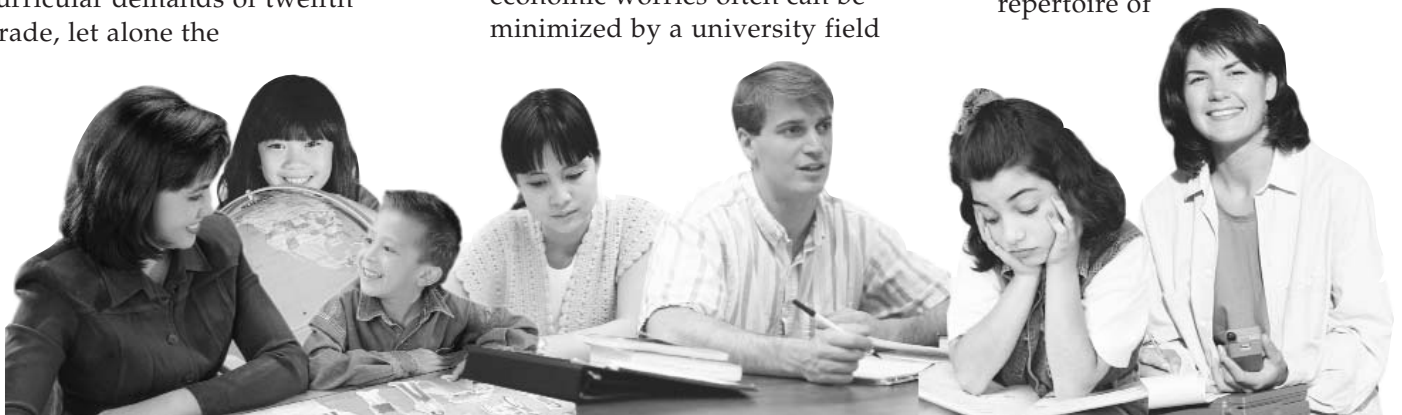
interdisciplinary reading, note-taking, writing, and test-taking tasks that await them at the university.

Fears of Higher Education

At the beginning of the school term, the new cohort of high school seniors are asked to specify what concerns them most about attending college and what they hope to get out of the program. The students in the ESL section invariably anticipate their greatest challenges being the costly tuition, the sprawling campus full of unfamiliar faces and buildings, "strict" professors who use "big vocabulary," unwieldy textbooks, and lengthy formal writing assignments. Their logistical and economic worries often can be minimized by a university field

trip, complete with a campus tour, class observations, and an orientation to student services and financial aid options.

Unfortunately, it is not so easy to assuage their fears about the academic language and literacy requirements of university curricula. Their collective trepidation is well warranted. It takes more than a high school diploma, family support, high aspirations, and a "si, se puede" (yes, it can be done) attitude for adolescent immigrants to excel in college. To thrive in American colleges and universities, ESL students must come equipped with subject matter knowledge, social and academic language proficiency, sophisticated literacy and problem-solving skills, and a repertoire of



independent learning and study strategies. The majority of the "Step to College Program" participants have gaps in each of these critical competencies.

Inadequate Preparation

Many factors account for these students' inadequate preparation for college work. They lack the linguistic resources in English to follow extended "unsheltered" lectures, glean a thesis and supporting points from expository readings, or demonstrate their understandings in a timed essay exam. While many

participate actively in group discussions and cooperative activities, their second-language confidence diminishes when they are required to grapple independently with grade-level core curricula through traditional formats such as lectures and textbook chapters. Although they are orally fluent in conversational English, they do not yet have a solid base in the specialized terminology and discourse of science, social studies, literature, and mathematics.

Cummins (1996) makes a fundamental distinction between social and academic aspects of language proficiency, and points out that the cognitive and contextual demands of varied classroom formats can be quite distinct, requiring strikingly different forms of second language competence. The ESL students in the college preparatory class demonstrate impressive basic interpersonal communication skills



(BICS), acquired through their context-embedded everyday interactions. In the school cafeteria and on the soccer field, social English is supported by a wide range of meaningful interpersonal and situational cues. In secondary and college coursework, however, these students are required to manipulate technical and

discipline-specific terminology in cognitively demanding, context-reduced situations. The cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) necessary for students to follow a biology lecture or history

documentary is developed primarily through extensive school-based reading and repeated exposure during content-based classroom activities. Furthermore, successive studies of ESL student achievement in U.S. public schools (Collier, 1992; Collier & Thomas, 1995) support Cummins's finding that while virtual beginners in English can acquire surface fluency in BICS in approximately two years, it takes an average of five to seven years to attain enough grade-level proficiency in CALP to reach even the 50th percentile on standardized tests.

Disadvantaged Readers

Adolescent ESL students who do not read widely and regularly in English are in the least enviable position with regard to development of academic language proficiency. Their



familiarity with school-based vocabulary is often limited to the instruction they receive in their classes. This is a rather hit-or-miss means of catching up with native-speaking peers, particularly for students who are still puzzled by routine terms such as *compare* and *summarize* while their teachers are clarifying the nuances of *nativism* and *racism*, *cerebrum* and *cerebellum*. Secondary ESL learners are at a further loss if their content area instructors do not consistently provide a rich contextualized environment that supports their simultaneous learning of academic concepts, language, and study skills.

Few of the ESL students in the "Step to College" program profess to be voluntary or habitual readers in either English or their home language. Many are hard pressed to identify a single recent pleasurable reading experience in English. Those who do dabble in extracurricular reading predictably cite teen romances, scary stories, the sports page, and fashion magazines as their literature of choice. While weekend forays into the *Goosebumps* series or the sports page have considerable potential for expanding their range of everyday English vocabulary (Krashen, 1993), it neither enriches their academic lexicon nor makes them more "text wise" and "text ready" for next week's biology chapter. Moreover, their acknowledged struggles with most twelfth-grade core curricula

suggest that all would have benefited from an additional year of support in ESL and specially designed content area instruction before being transferred to the academic mainstream.

These students simply have not had enough exposure to academic English to feel confident managing the second language demands of their high school coursework. They are even less prepared for the traditional college curricula. Daniel, a seventeen-year-old from Honduras, vividly described this dilemma in a journal entry about his school-based reading experiences in English:

"Today is my four year that I am studying English as my second language, and I am still stuck in reading. I have had conflicts with reading. And disappointment sometimes. I can see that I can communicate with others. I can see that I can talk to others. I am not afraid like I used to be. But when I am reading, it is different. I do understand when my teacher is talking. But when we get to the point that we have to read it, I can pronounce the words okay, but so often I can't understand. And it's because of the same thing. There are so many new words I don't understand. I have to go to the dictionary and look up the meaning, and I have to stop again to look up another word over and over and over, and then try to figure out the main point. And that's a drag."

A Lack of Learning and Study Strategies

Daniel and his classmates are hindered in their scholastic pursuits by their sketchy foundation in academic English and impoverished repertoire of successful learning and study strategies. Approaching grade-



level curricula well beyond their current linguistic means, compounded in many cases by negligible background knowledge of the subject matter, these students must have efficient and effective strategies for completing academic tasks with less than a full understanding of the material. While some instructors have taken great lengths to make their lessons comprehensible, few seem to devote much time to modeling how to learn effectively in their respective disciplines. Consequently, a motivated learner like Daniel, who does his best to remain engaged during a lecture-discussion, pays careful attention to grasp the main points but neglects to take any notes for future review. This is in great part because no one has introduced him to an effective note-taking system, then coached him in his efforts and consistently assessed his progress.

While Daniel heralds his strides in conversational English after three years in high school, he goes on to describe his efforts to tackle core reading curricula as a relentless series of vocabulary pitfalls. Daniel's reliance on word-by-word decoding to extract meaning from readings illustrates that he is not familiar with the format and organization of various content area texts. Consequently, he has no clue where to focus his attention more productively to glean the most critical information. Furthermore, his frequent trips to the bilingual dictionary indicate that he is not aware of the utility of the



textbook glossary, and that he cannot rely upon skills in context analysis to make informed guesses about new words. Daniel also fails to mention any follow-up effort to record the definitions of the new terms, so it is doubtful that he actually internalizes and recollects their meanings the next time he encounters them.

Lacking academic strategies that significantly enhance their understanding and retention of core curricula presented through lectures, texts, and other context-reduced formats, ESL students resort to what Adamson (1993, p. 71) refers to as coping strategies. In his study of 34 high school and college ESL students' learning and study strategies, Adamson observed that most dealt with challenging content area material by developing mechanical ways of completing assignments without necessarily understanding them. One widespread coping strategy employed by nearly all of the students in the college preparatory program is completing an assigned chapter by scanning the pages for key words from the study questions. While any successful student has done this on a few occasions, many ESL students in the program say they never have attempted more than this with reading assignments they consider insurmountable.

Adamson (1993) points out an insidious effect of this coping strategy. ESL students in need of acute instructional intervention may very well succeed in concealing their lack of genuine understanding. In fact, a fluent and engaged classroom learner like Daniel rarely is identified as being

academically challenged. He compensates for his academic literacy shortcomings by attending to pre-reading/post-reading oral presentations supported by visual aids and participating actively in related activities. Although he has managed to mask his high school reading travails, Daniel's coping strategies will not serve him well in college courses, where lectures and cooperative tasks are designed to elaborate upon and apply, rather than review in detail, the conceptual foundations established through preliminary independent reading.

Conclusion

In short, these adolescents are on the threshold of graduating from high school without the academic competence to successfully navigate the demands of college. In our zeal to develop students' social-interactive competence in English and help them grasp core curricula through hands-on activities and context-embedded presentations,



“learning to learn” in the academic disciplines has been left largely to chance. Adequate attention has not been devoted to the academic language and independent learning and study strategies vital to success in higher education.

Educators need to have high expectations for language, literacy, and learning development of all students. Specifying strategies and skills employed by effective learners within and across diverse subject areas will help educators successfully instruct and guide novice learners. In order to provide an equitable context for educational achievement and mobility, ESL teachers and their content-area colleagues must demystify academic competence for students, both ESL and native English speakers, by sharing with them the cognitive secrets of successful learners across the curricula.

Dr. Kate Kinsella is a teacher educator in the Department of Secondary Education at San Francisco State University, specializing in academic language and literacy

development in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. She remains actively involved with secondary students by teaching a year-long college preparatory course for first-generation college students through SFSU's "Step to College Program." She also is an active consultant to K-12 schools and colleges nationally and internationally.

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For Kinsella's complete list of references and suggested readings, visit our web site at www.ballard-tighe.com.

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Barry Caldwell has been named Superintendent of the Chaffey Joint Unified High School District in Ontario, California.

Gus Keene has been appointed Superintendent of the Cuba Independent School District in Cuba, New Mexico.

Dr. Michael Pladus of Interboro High School in Prospect Park, Pennsylvania, has been named the 1999 National Principal of the Year.

Dave Dickson, teacher at Thurston Middle School in Laguna Beach, California, has received the Crystal Apple Award from Channel 4 News in southern California.

Veronica Garcia has been appointed Superintendent of the Santa Fe Public Schools in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Dr. Amarante Fresquez was appointed Superintendent of the Roswell Independent Schools in Roswell, New Mexico.

Marge Vallejos retired from her position as superintendent of the Las Vegas City Schools in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

The following **California State University** alumni teachers were honored as part of CSU's Celebrating Teachers campaign: Bonnie Burrows, Vicki Silva, Marjorie Bornyasz, Stephen Bock, Shauhna Faitlin, Ursula Sexton, Lucy Quinby, Cedric Anderson, Myra LeBendig, Lily Towata, Melissa Manning, Alison Hunsaker, Debby Ford, Patty (Vaughn) Waggoner-Yamat, Lois Clark, Patrick Pierson, Reno Taini, Kristine Morrella, Nancy Thompson, Rick Ausby, Jane Girm, and Marie Logan.

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