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Soleado

Promising Practices from the Field

Accessing Students' Knowledge and Experience: Developing Schema in Sheltered Instruction

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In the fall 2014 issue of *Soleado*, we revisited the notion of sheltered instruction. In the offices of Dual Language Education of New Mexico, the discussion regarding sheltered instruction, its components, its strategies, its application ... its very name, are all fodder for deep conversation. These articles are providing a practical outlet for all this thought, talk, and practice!

In this issue, our focus will be on the sheltered instruction components of *accessing prior knowledge/creating shared knowledge* and the *use of realia*. It seems fitting to be thinking of these component areas as we consider the very diversity of the students in our classes. Here in New Mexico and across the United States, English learner students reflect a continuum of proficiency



Using realia, students work together to explore the properties of rocks.

we already know so much about this student, we do little to tap into prior knowledge. Perhaps we begin a KWL chart at the beginning of a unit, but we rarely go back to the chart at the end of the unit to fill in the last

column. Perhaps we lead the class in some brainstorming or pre-reading activities that get the students to begin thinking about their prior knowledge. But the activity is fairly brief and we do little to elicit the thinking and the language that surround the students' recollections and ideas. We might even follow our usual unit plan and schedule a field trip to the zoo at the end of a unit on animal adaptations.

At first glance, these activities seem very appropriate. First of all,

the chances are pretty high that we'll still have many students in our classrooms who are either first generation or the children and grandchildren of immigrants from rural Chihuahua. Any activity that engages the students in a consideration of prior knowledge is good, and a field trip at the end of the unit—what's not to like?

But, let's think a bit deeper ... what if a student enrolls tomorrow from Iraq, or Eritrea, or Korea? What if they're Mexican, but from a large city in the more central state of San Luis Potosí? What are their experiences? Their prior knowledge? What are their ways of knowing and how representative of their culture are they? Why is it so important to tap into those experiences?

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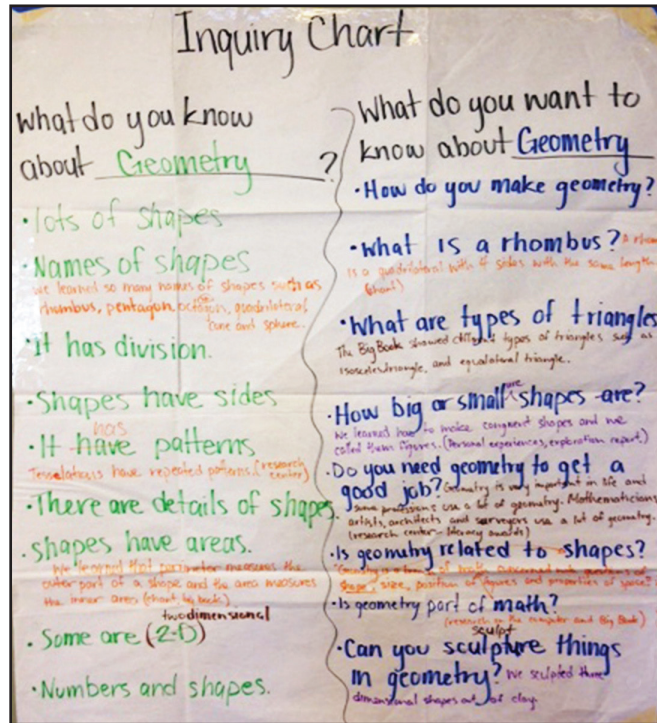
across languages. This includes recently-arrived immigrant students, as well as the U.S. born academic English learner who may no longer speak a heritage language but whose English development does not represent the more formal academic register of school.

We have become quite accustomed to our typical immigrant student from rural Chihuahua. We have a sense that we know this student, the likely experiences s/he brings to the classroom, even a sense of the cultural lens through which s/he views the world. Feeling like

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In Lily Wong Fillmore's "Model of Second Language Acquisition," three types of processes take center stage in supporting the development of a second language: social, linguistic, and cognitive. In the last issue of *Soleado*, I discussed focusing on language and ways that teachers can plan for purposeful peer interaction so that all students have a chance to develop strong academic language skills. Clearly, these two sheltering components fit nicely into the social and linguistic processes Dr. Wong Fillmore speaks about. As teachers, it is easier to see how we might influence these processes.

The cognitive processes that Dr. Wong Fillmore identifies are highly complex and allow for intensive analysis by students. These analyses help students develop and understand the relationship that exists between events, ideas, and experiences as they develop the language necessary to comprehend instruction and explain their understanding. This mental framework, often referred to as schema, allows us to make sense of the world and process new learning. At the same time, a learner's exposure to the new language—its sounds, syntax, grammar, and functions—provides the linguistic data needed for the student to develop a way to use that language to deepen thinking and share thoughts and ideas. For example, once students understand the role that nominalization plays in academic text, the more likely they are to use it to discuss events as trends and not just a single occurrence. *Evaporation* as a concept is much broader than a quick discussion of how water *evaporates* during the water cycle. Teaching students to tap their prior knowledge and experiences provides a scaffold that they can easily access on their own as they encounter new ideas.



Posing new questions and adding information to charts keeps students engaged and amplifies the instructional effectiveness.

So, what might this look like? Certainly, using graphic organizers, thinking maps, and other charts to organize information shared by students is a great strategy. As the teacher, you can serve as a scribe of information and descriptions of experiences the students share. Students can also add to the charts and return to them over time as a resource. A pre-literate student may add a sketch or picture that represents his or her experiences.

You and the other students can help that student find the words to describe the sketch. Remember to go back to those charts ... As instruction uncovers more information, as questions written in the W column are answered, as new questions arise and as students engage in individual and group investigations, add them to the charts! Tack on an extra sheet of chart paper, or encourage the students to add information or new questions onto sticky notes.

Another way to access prior knowledge is to use realia, or real stuff, that your students can touch, hear, see, or smell that relates

to your unit of study. Before you begin your study of seed dispersal, consider providing your students with fuzzy socks to wear over their shoes and then taking them on a walking fieldtrip! Once back in your classroom, have students pair up and take inventory of the seeds they find on their socks. Perhaps they can classify them on a matrix grid based on their method of dispersal—hitchhiking seeds that stick to a furry animal, seeds that are eaten and dropped elsewhere, seeds that are blown on the wind, and seeds that travel on water. This kind of activity serves as an excellent means of deepening students' understanding of the content, but it also provides a meaningful opportunity to hear and use the language inherent to the content.

Before you begin your unit on water use, gather images of water used for bathing, for agricultural purposes, for recreational purposes, and for industrial purposes. These can be collected from online

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resources such as Google™ images, from magazines like *National Geographic*, or from old text books. Give table groups four or five different pictures and direct them to discuss what they see, tell stories that relate to the images, and complete either an open sort (group the images in a way that makes sense and can be explained) or a closed sort (group all of the images that relate to industrial uses of water).

Many of our students have not had experiences or exposure to resources that support this cognitive framework. In this case, consider how you might create shared knowledge. Are there video clips or games available through teacher sites such as BrainPOP™, Discovery Education™, or TeacherTube®? Can you put images on the Promethean® or SMART Board®? Can you watch a filmed version of *Romeo and Juliet* before you ask your students to wade through Shakespearean English so they have a sense of the story before they experience the poetry of the play? Could you take a field trip to the zoo at the beginning of the unit on animal adaptations so that students who have never had the opportunity to see the animal features to which you will refer have a chance to do so? These real items, pictures, images, sketches, and video clips also serve the very practical purpose of clarifying the meaning of vocabulary tied to a unit of study. That's comprehensible input!

While the use of these strategies is important to tap prior knowledge, create shared knowledge, and clarify meaning, what elevates their effectiveness is the talk that accompanies their use ... and not just the teacher's talk! As I mentioned in previous articles, this kind of talk is not between the teacher and the one student elected to respond. That practice limits the opportunity for student engagement, for student rehearsal of new terminology and language, and ultimately, for the students to acquire the language. A far more effective practice would be for the teacher to pose the question and direct the students to turn to a partner or students seated around them and discuss possible answers. Only after providing the students with several minutes to engage in conversation should the teacher randomly select someone to report out what was discussed. The focus should be on the random selection of the spokesperson—that way all of the students must be prepared to answer, even those who are not highly proficient in English or outspoken enough to easily address the whole class. The students must be reminded that they are all

responsible for making sure that every one on their team or in the partnership can respond. They must create and rehearse their responses together so that each member can respond.

Spencer Kagan labeled this cooperative structure *Numbered Heads*. While it is highly effective for all students, for ELs, the opportunity to represent the thinking and language of the team is invaluable. Students in teams could select a number so that the teacher could roll a die or pull numbered sticks to determine who should respond. Partners could assign themselves the letter *a* or *b*. Name sticks could be used to call on a student. This random selection ensures the development of oral academic language and provides an authentic and meaningful reason to talk.

The more we talk about the eight individual components that Dual Language Education of New Mexico has identified as key to learning in a second language, the more it becomes apparent that these components are all part of a coherent, well-planned, and considered approach to teaching and learning. We can separate them out to talk about them, to define them, and to provide examples, but the reality is that they are woven in and out of everything we, as teachers, do. We address them often and in different ways; it is, in fact, that redundancy that provides the scaffolds our academic language learners need. Their importance to our students merits thoughtful and purposeful consideration and planning. In the next issue of *Soleado*, we'll zero in on making text accessible and developing student learning strategies.

New Partners for DLeNM

DLeNM announces two exciting, new partnerships with the Colorado and California Associations for Bilingual Education. Partnership agreements demonstrate our commitment to supporting the individual and collective work of our organizations in supporting second language and emerging bilingual learners. Look for DLeNM staff and board members at our partners' annual conferences:

California Association for Bilingual Education
March 4-7 in San Diego, California
<http://www.bilingualeducation.org/cabe2015/>

Colorado Association for Bilingual Education
September 24-25 in Westminster, Colorado
<http://www.cocabe.org/>

