Matching up ESL Learners and Teachers-in-Training to Maximize Learning

By Dawn Bikowski and Jessy Hendrickx

The practical application of theories learned in TESOL graduate classes for teacher training programs in the United States is an integral part of a program. While programs expose students to language learning theory, methodology and other field specific courses and practicums, students may desire to have more practical training with English Language Learners (ELLs) in a supervised manner. This approach is often beneficial for TESOL graduate students as well as for the ELLs. It provides a platform in which master’s students can utilize the pedagogy they learn in the classrooms as well as a chance for the ELLs to have specialized one-on-one attention with a tutor in their subject area. This is a chance to utilize their training in a teaching setting. Many of the instructors in the Linguistics Department’s Ohio Program of Intensive English (OPIE) are collaborating with the master’s students to work with the ELLs throughout the semester. This is a double benefit for the university because ELLs need as much experience as possible communicating in English as well as individualized attention, while teachers-in-training benefit from applying what they learn in class. The remainder of this article discusses one such project at Ohio University, including the theoretical background as well as project specifics.

Theoretical Background

The primary learning theory this project was built upon was constructivism. Considered one of the founders of social learning, Vygotsky (1978) stated that “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Von Glasersfeld (1982) points out the active role of the individual, in that according to constructivism “there is no way of transferring knowledge — every know-er has to build it up for himself” (p. 1). He goes on to describe learners as organizers who shape their world through interpretation. Autonomy and self-directed learning were also called upon, as good language learners have been found to be self-directed and display autonomy in their language learning (Benson, 2001). In this specific project, the ELLs and teachers-in-training worked together to build their own knowledge of both the English language and of the process of learning itself.

Project Specifics

The teachers-in-training at Ohio University were first year graduate students taking a Teaching Reading and Writing Course. These graduate students consisted of 21 students with native or near-native English speaking abilities. The Language Learners in the Intensive English Program were full-time English, and were advanced level students enrolled in the Core Class in which the content included advanced reading, writing, and grammar. The class consisted of 13 students (9 from China, 4 from Saudi Arabia); there were
three graduate students and 10 undergraduate students and their majors were in Education, Business, Engineering, and Art. Due to the greater number of Linguistics MA students, teams consisted of one or two teachers-in-training and two or three ELLs. Topics of the tutoring sessions included grammar, reading and writing and skills and strategies to improve them, in addition to useful online resources.

Grouping and class time were carefully considered. The same groups were maintained throughout the quarter and met four times in class in a computer lab and a minimum of three times outside of class. This configuration was chosen for a number of reasons: a.) to integrate the project into the courses and provide sufficient accountability and any necessary trouble-shooting, b.) to align the curricular goals for both courses, and c.) to allow the university instructors to help the students build rapport. Requiring sessions outside of class allowed the ELLs and teachers-in-training to have sufficient time to work more closely together. In all sessions, students were told that the ELLs should be driving the content of the tutoring sessions — the teachers-in-training should allow the learners to lead. The ELLs were prepped for this process as well before it began. The OPIE instructor made sure they understood the social standards in this type of academic situation as well as the responsibility of the student. The students were required to attend outside of class. The ELLs also wrote their own goals and objectives before participating in the project.

Reading topics worked on in their tutoring sessions including rate and fluency, comprehension, skimming, scanning, drawing inferences and distinguishing details. Writing topics focused on grammar, organization, timed writings, using sources and proofreading.

**Student Project Outcomes**

While the master’s students were working with the ELLs they were also completing a project for their course work. This project was as Language Learner Case Study that required three outside sources and consisted of the following:

- Introduction — including project background and the learners’ and MA students’ goals
- Project plan and activities — including needs assessments, activities, samples of students’ work, evaluations
- Activity justifications — a brief write-up of why each activity was chosen, linking the activity to needs assessment or learner goals, and also an explanation of activities that had been considered but were not chosen
- Final reflection — a conclusion including what they learned or did not learn, what they enjoyed or did not enjoy, and accomplishment toward goals

The graduate students practiced activities in their MA class in order to prepare them for their role as teachers in their tutoring sessions. As well, guidelines for working with the ELLs were given, such as being a learner and professional; working toward specific goals; and discussing goals, strategies, and learning with the ELLs. Class time also consisted of considering the role of culture in the learning process, linking theories to practice, and discussing which activities worked with the learners and under what conditions. In this way, the teachers-in-training were able to support each other as they led their tutoring groups.

In their IEP course, the ELLs were required to write a Final Course Reflection, which asked them to consider what they had learned from the experience in the skill areas of reading and writing. Overall, there was positive feedback from both the teachers in training and the ELLs.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, both the teachers-in-training and the ELLs greatly benefited from being matched up in this scenario. This situation not only gave the teachers-in-training a means to practice the theories they learned, but it also gave them a chance to reflect on their experiences. The ELLs benefited from one-on-one tutoring throughout the quarter. They not only received assistance in their weaker language skill areas, but they were able to use English while working with their tutors. In the words of one ELL, “The tutors are good for me. My tutor gave me so much help in reading and vocabulary. We have met several times outside the class and I
got some experience about study skills from her.”
A teacher in training also noted, “I realized how
crucial reading fluency is for non-native English
speakers. Before this project, my idea of reading
was to go over the reading material, help students
understand the main idea and supporting ideas,
pick up the important grammar points to explain,
and finally, ask students to do multiple choice
quizzes to prove that they had full understand-
ing of the text... Now I realize that as language
teachers, we should help students build their real
reading ability instead of just test-taking reading
skills.” These are wonderful observations indeed.
While organizing these types of instructional ex-
changes requires sufficient time and planning, the
instructors and all students can greatly benefit
from everyone learning collaboratively.

Dawn Bikowski, PhD, is Director of the English
Language Improvement Program in the Linguis-
tics Department at Ohio University.

Jessy Hendrickx is a faculty member in the Ohio
Program of Intensive English, at Ohio University
and serves as the Listening and Speaking Skill
Area Coordinator.

References

Benson, P. (2001). Teaching and researching autonomy in

Von Glasersfeld, E. (1982). An interpretation of Piaget’s con-
structivism. Revue Internationale de Philosophie, 36(4): 612-
35.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of
higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press.