English Language Learners with Special Needs
Effective Instructional Strategies

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Students fail in school for a variety of reasons. In some cases, their academic difficulties can be directly attributed to deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment. For example, students with limited English may fail because they do not have access to effective bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) instruction (Ortiz, 1997). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have difficulty if instruction presumes middle-class experiences. Other students may have learning difficulties stemming from linguistic or cultural differences. These difficulties may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the students' specific needs. Unless these students receive appropriate intervention, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will widen over time.

Still other students need specialized instruction because of specific learning disabilities. The overrepresentation of English language learners in special education classes (Yates & Ortiz, 1998) suggests that educators have difficulty distinguishing students who truly have learning disabilities from students who are failing for other reasons, such as limited English. Students learning English are disadvantaged by a scarcity of appropriate assessment instruments and a lack of personnel trained to conduct linguistically and culturally relevant educational assessments (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996). English language learners who need special education services are further disadvantaged by the shortage of special educators who are trained to address their language- and disability-related needs simultaneously.

Improving the academic performance of students from non-English backgrounds requires a focus on the prevention of failure and on early intervention for struggling learners. This digest presents a framework for meeting the needs of these students in general education and suggests ways to operationalize prevention and early intervention to ensure that students meet their academic potential.

PREVENTION OF SCHOOL FAILURE

Prevention of failure among English language learners involves two critical elements: the creation of educational environments that are conducive to their academic success and the use of instructional strategies known to be effective with these students (Ortiz, 1997; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991).

Preventing school failure begins with the creation of school climates that foster academic success and empower students (Cummins, 1989). Such environments reflect a philosophy that all students can learn and that educators are responsible for helping them learn. Positive school environments are characterized by strong administrative leadership; high expectations for student achievement; challenging, appropriate curricula and instruction; a safe and orderly environment; ongoing, systematic evaluation of student progress; and shared decision-making among ESL teachers, general education teachers, administrators, and parents. Several other factors are critical to the success of English language learners, including the following: (1) a shared knowledge base among educators about effective ways to work with students learning English, (2) recognition of the importance of the students' native language, (3) collaborative school and community relationships, (4) academically rich programs that integrate basic skills instruction with the teaching of higher order skills in both the native language and in English, and (5) effective instruction.

A Shared Knowledge Base

Teachers must share a common philosophy and knowledge base relative to the education of students learning English. They should be knowledgeable about all of the following areas: second language acquisition; the relationship of native language proficiency to the development of English; assessment of proficiency in the native language and English; sociocultural influences on learning; effective first and second language instruction; informal assessment strategies that can be used to monitor progress, particularly in language and literacy development; and effective strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities.

Recognition of the Students' Native Language

Language programs must have the support of principals, teachers, parents, and the community. School staff should understand that native language instruction provides the foundation for achieving high levels of English proficiency (Cummins, 1994; Krashen, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Language development should be the shared responsibility of all teachers, not only those in bilingual and ESL classes.

Collaborative School-Community Relationships

Parents of students learning English must be viewed as capable advocates for their children and as valuable resources in school improvement efforts (Cummins, 1994). By being involved with the families and communities of English learners, educators come to understand the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which the children are being raised (Ortiz, 1997). Thus, educators learn to respect cultural differences in child-rearing practices and in how parents choose to be involved in their children's education (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997).

Academically Rich Programs

Students learning English must have opportunities to learn advanced skills in comprehension, reasoning, and composition and have access to curricula and instruction that integrate basic skill development with higher order thinking and problem solving (Ortiz, & Wilkinson, 1991).

Effective Instruction

Students must have access to high-quality instruction designed to help them meet high expectations. Teachers should employ strategies known to be effective with English learners, such as drawing on their prior knowledge; providing opportunities to review previously learned concepts and teaching them to employ those concepts; organizing themes or strands that connect the curriculum across subject areas; and providing individual guidance, assistance, and support to fill gaps in background knowledge.

EARLY INTERVENTION FOR STRUGGLING LEARNERS

Most learning problems can be prevented if students are in positive school and classroom contexts that accommodate individual differences. However, even in the most positive environments, some students still experience difficulties. For these students, early intervention strategies must be implemented as soon as learning problems are noted. Early intervention means that "supplementary instructional services are provided early in students' schooling, and that they are intense enough to bring at-risk students quickly to a level at which they can profit from high-quality classroom instruction" (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1991, p. 594).

The intent of early intervention is to create general education support systems for struggling learners as a way to improve academic performance and to reduce inappropriate special education referrals. Examples of early intervention include clinical teaching, peer and expert consultation, teacher assistance teams, and alternative programs such as those that offer tutorial or remedial instruction in the context of general education.

Clinical Teaching

Clinical teaching is carefully sequenced. First, teachers teach skills, subjects, or concepts; then they reteach using different strategies or approaches for the benefit of students who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction; finally, they use informal assessment strategies to identify the possible causes of failure (Ortiz, 1997; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991). Teachers conduct curriculum-based assessment to monitor student progress and use the data from these assessments to plan and modify instruction.

Peer or Expert Consultation

Peers or experts work collaboratively with general education teachers to address students' learning problems and to implement recommendations for intervention (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990). For example, teachers can share instructional resources, observe each other's classrooms, and offer suggestions for improving instruction or managing behavior. ESL teachers can help general education teachers by demonstrating strategies to integrate English learners in mainstream classrooms. In schools with positive climates, faculty function as a community and share the goal of helping students and each other, regardless of the labels students have been given or the programs or classrooms to which teachers and students are assigned.

Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs)

TATs can help teachers resolve problems they routinely encounter in their classrooms (Chalfant & Pysh, 1981). These teams, comprised of four to six general education teachers and the teacher who requests assistance, design interventions to help struggling learners. Team members work to reach a consensus about the nature of a student's problem; determine priorities for intervention; help the classroom teacher to select strategies or approaches to solve the problem; assign responsibility for carrying out the recommendations; and establish a follow-up plan to monitor progress. The classroom teacher then implements the plan, and follow-up meetings are held to review progress toward resolution of the problem.

Alternative Programs and Services

General education, not special education, should be primarily responsible for the education of students with special learning needs that cannot be attributed to disabilities, such as migrant students who may miss critical instruction over the course of the year or immigrant children why may arrive in U. S. schools with limited prior education. General education alternatives may include one-on-one tutoring, family and support groups, family counseling, and the range of services supported by federal Title I funds. Such support should be supplemental to and not a replacement for general education instruction.

REFERRAL TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

When prevention and early intervention strategies fail to resolve learning difficulties, referral to special education is warranted. The responsibilities of special education referral committees are similar to those of TATs. The primary difference is that referral committees include a variety of specialists, such as principals, special education teachers, and assessment personnel. These specialists bring their expertise to bear on the problem, especially in areas related to assessment, diagnosis, and specialized instruction.

Decisions of the referral committee are formed by data gathered through the prevention, early intervention, and referral processes.

The recommendation that a student receive a comprehensive individual assessment to determine whether special education services are needed indicates the following: (1) the child is in a positive school climate; (2) the teacher has used instructional strategies known to be effective for English learners; (3) neither clinical teaching nor interventions recommended by the TAT resolved the problem; and (4) other general education alternatives also proved unsuccessful. If students continue to struggle in spite of these efforts to individualize instruction and to accommodate their learning characteristics, they most likely have a learning disability (Ortiz, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Early intervention for English learners who are having difficulty in school is first and foremost the responsibility of general education professionals. If school climates are not supportive and if instruction is not tailored to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in general education, these students have little chance of succeeding. Interventions that focus solely on remediating students' learning and behavior problems will yield limited results.

The anticipated outcomes of problem-prevention strategies and early intervention include the following: a reduction in the number of students perceived to be at risk by general education teachers because of teachers' increased ability to accommodate the naturally occurring diversity of skills and characteristics of students in their classes, reduction in the number of students inappropriately referred to remedial or special education programs, reduction in the number of students inaccurately identified as having a disability, and improved student outcomes in both general and special education.

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