**Case Study**

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**A Case Study on teaching ESL students**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this case study is to observe an English Language Learner and identify how they acquire academic literacies in the classroom. The author will describe a case study of classroom instruction and how a student acquires language through student, teacher and peer interactions. This case study is based on five hours of observations in a sheltered English classroom. The information for this project was obtained through interviews, observations, and interactions with the student. The author will provide major findings as well as improvements that need to be made in order for the student to acquire academic language.

**Introduction**

As someone who is currently obtaining a teaching credential and M.A in teaching through University of Redlands, I recognize the importance of a quality education. Academic literacy is needed to succeed in the university setting. It requires students to think critically and obtain in-depth-knowledge about a particular subject. This is already a difficult task for students who are native English speakers, but this is even more challenging for EL learners. Before EL students start college, it is important that they receive a quality education before they enter the university system. It is the responsibility of primary and secondary school teachers to prepare all students for this new academic adventure. In order to prepare English Language Learners, it is crucial that teachers are challenging them but also providing them support throughout their education; this will help them rise to academic standards and sustain academic rigor (Walqui, 2010). Walqui (2010) argues that a good teacher “engages students in establishing connections between and across key ideas of the theme being learned” (p.25) As teacher’s, we must reflect on our own experiences as learners because the requirement to make meaning, integrate, and connect is a new standard of teaching. As teachers, we must be able to make themes reappear, so students can connect them in different ways to deepen their understanding of the discipline (Walqui, 2010). By conducting this case study, it is my goal to acquire the knowledge needed to be a good teacher for all students but specifically English Language Learners, so I can help them grow intellectually, socially, and linguistically throughout their childhood education.

**My Case Study**

Before I did my observations, I came up with two questions to consider while observing a particular student. I wanted to focus my case on student and teacher interactions and students’ attitudes towards learning. After the questions were created, I chose the teacher I would observe and an appropriate participant to acquire this data.

***Questions***

I decided on two research questions that would focus on teacher/student interactions and students’ attitudes towards learning. The research questions I decided on are:

1. How do we motivate students to acquire a new language?
2. What does the teacher do to help a particular student gain academic literacy?

***My Case Study Participant***

I knew I wanted to choose Siyi as my case study participant. Siyi is an 11th grade student from China. From interacting with her prior, I knew she had little knowledge of the English language. Outside of class, Siyi is very social. She has a lot of friends who speak Mandarin Chinese and I have often seen her smiling and joking with them before class. In class, Siyi is quiet. She shuts down unless she is interacting with a friend who speaks Mandarin. In class, Siyi relies heavily on technology and friends to help her understand the English language. When trying to come up with a word or an idea, she would often ask a friend in mandarin and then translate it to English. In class, she has little confidence in her English-speaking abilities and focuses more on form than quality interactions.

Siyi was born in China and came to America when she was 8 years old. She attended public elementary school in Eastvale, California and now attends Elenore Roosevelt High School in Eastvale. I find Siyi’s case very interesting. Even though she’s been in America since the third grade, 8 years later she is still considered a level 1 English Language learner. What really motivated me to choose Siyi as my case study participant is her ability to learn. Even though she is a level one EL learner, she takes AP Chinese classes and has a desire to learn in her other classes. Her willingness to acquire knowledge is apparent, but she retracts in her English class. The potential for Siyi to be a successful English student, acquire a new language, and gain academic literacy is there, she just needs some supportive guidance to help her overcome her insecurities.

***Elenore Roosevelt High School***

Elenore Roosevelt High School is 1 out of 9 high schools in the Corona Norco Unified School District. According to US News, Roosevelt high is ranked 285th within California and scored a 36.8 on the college readiness index. Their total enrollment of students is 4,079 and teacher to student ratio is 26:1. The total minority enrollment is 82% with 41% of students being economically disadvantaged. The school is diverse with 47% of students being Hispanic. 19% of students are Asian which is the second highest minority population in the school. At Roosevelt High, 237 students are considered English Language Learners with 24.05% speaking Mandarin Chinese as their first language. There are 17 students in the 11th grade that speak Mandarin Chinese as a first language. Roosevelt High offers a variety of classes to help establish student equity. They offer sheltered classes to help support their EL learners, Avid and AP classes, and they provide a variety of STEM and CTE classes to interest students and provide them with a quality and engaging education.

***How I Gathered Data***

I gathered a data a number of ways. I did five observational hours in Mrs. Bricco 11th grade sheltered ELL class, a teacher interview, an informal interview with the student, and I examined the student’s classwork. These methods allowed me to get a clear understanding of how Siyi was being instructed and what she was able to apply to her academics. I was able to gather this information by taking detailed observation notes and by asking the teacher and student questions. I applied all of these techniques to better understand Siyi’s language acquisition.

I observed Siyi for a total of 5 hours in Mrs. Bricco’s sheltered English course. The first time I observed Siyi, the class was reading the *The House on Mango Street.* A week later, I observed while the class was learning about how to write an academic paper. During my observations, I took detailed field notes on interactions between Siyi and the instructor and her and her classmates. I observed body language, her readiness (or lack of) to participate, her actions when called on, and her response to class instruction. Furthermore, I wrote down how she interacted with her class as a whole during discussions and work groups. These observations gave me insight on Siyi’s skills to acquire language and academic literacy. Furthermore, I was able to witness her level of confidence when interacting in class.

The informal interviews I conducted with both Siyi and Mrs. Bricco were very insightful and allowed me to better understand the student and her comfort level associated with reading, writing and language acquisition. During the interview with Siyi, I asked her questions about her life in China and life in the United States. I also questioned her about school and received insight on the classes she liked and disliked and asked her to give me a short explanation why. I also inquired about her likeliness to read and write in English. I also asked what her goals were and what she wanted to do after high school. Siyi’s responses weren’t surprising. She did not like to read and write, and she did not favor her English class. She preferred science out of all her classes because she was able to use her hands. She did have a goal to go to college and she knew she needed that knowledge in order to attend a four-year university. She wasn’t sure if she’d make it into college, but she really wanted to try.

I had a few informal interviews with Mrs. Bricco during my observations in her classroom. Mrs. Bricco has been a teacher for five years and has been employed at Roosevelt High school for 2 years. This was her first-year teaching sheltered English and she admitted that it was somewhat of a challenge and an ongoing learning experience for her. I asked questions about Siyi and what she was doing to help students like Siyi. Mrs. Bricco had a lot to say about Siyi, but the most surprising was that Siyi was enrolled in AP Chinese. With only being a level one EL student, I was surprised to hear that she can keep up with a high demand course. This indicates that Siyi has academic potential but is lacking the support she needs to acquire language.

**My Findings and Discussion**

After observing in Siyi in the classroom, analysis of the data collected led to these major findings:

1. Engage for engagement – know your students
2. Teacher support is needed to acquire a new language

***Engage for Engagement***

As mentioned above, I was surprised to know that Siyi was enrolled in an AP Chinese course despite her low EL level. When I asked her about her AP Chinese course, she was happy to be discussing her position in that class. She turned into a new student and was excited to talk about her teacher and current A plus grade. I asked what she loved most about her AP class and she said that “she loved learning about her culture and that it was easy for her to understand.” I asked if she learned about her culture in other classes and she replied, “sometimes but usually no”. It was apparent that there was a need to introduce the Chinese culture in Mrs. Bricco’s class. The student’s where currently reading *The House on Mango Street.* They did popcorn reading in class. When it was time for Siyi to read, she didn’t know where we were in the text. When she started reading, she read very slow and frequently asked how to say certain words. After reading, Mrs. Bricco would take the opportunity to discuss each vignette. There would be whole class discussion about what the vignette meant, but Siyi did not participate. She stayed quiet and drew pictures in her notebook, talked to friends, or glanced at her cell phone. She was unengaged during the lesson and had no interest in participating in the classroom discussion. This book was relatable to the Spanish speaking students in the classroom but not Siyi.

***How To Improve***

While teaching *The House on Mango Street,* Mrs. Bricco could have been inclusive of other cultures by incorporating an opportunity for her students to compare and contrast each other’s cultures. Half of her students speak Mandarin Chinese, so it would have been beneficial to also include their backgrounds and have a lesson on the differences between Chinese and Hispanic cultures. It is important for teachers to show appreciation for student’s cultures and language by making it a central aspect of instruction. students will value their learning experiences and it will make learning English an attainable goal (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). In Siyi’s case, she was very interested in her Chinese culture and it noticeably made her happy. If there was an opportunity for her to talk about being Chinese and reflect on her past experiences as a Chinese girl, she would have a reason to be involved in the readings and in classroom discussion. According to schema theory, students can make meaning of the text based on their own schema which Gibbons defines as “the mental frameworks that we develop as a result of our particular cultural experiences” (p.83). Siyi struggles with reading and comprehension in class but if there was more opportunity to talk read and apply her culture to the readings, she could use her schema to comprehend the text and make connections to the readings. This helps build bridges to new language development.

***Teacher Support is Needed***

While observing Mrs. Bricco’s class, it was apparent that there was a lack of teacher support for her students. During the readings, Siyi was not engaged in the text and would lack the comprehensible knowledge needed to answer complex questions. She also didn’t have the language to answer certain questions. Often times she would use hand gestures to try and explain a word or concept. She would get discouraged when she was unable to outright answer a question. Her body language in class was poor and was a reflection of her low self-esteem during classroom discussion.

During the lesson on writing and text dependent questions, Mrs. Bricco used a PowerPoint and students had to fill in the blanks, take notes in their own words, and then give an example; however, Siyi seemed overly confused on how to complete the worksheet. Furthermore, there was no review on text dependent questions nor was there a connection made between text dependent questions and writing a topic sentence. The classroom instruction jumped from reading *The House on Mango Street* into this worksheet without any explanation on how text dependent questions relate to topic sentences and writing. There was also no vocabulary review or modeling of the worksheet to help students complete the work sheet. When students asked what a word meant, Mrs. Bricco would ask them to look it up in translate or ask a friend. She did not engage in student conversation to help with the students language acquisition.

***How to Improve on Reading***

To help students read and acquire new language, Mrs. Bricco could utilize before, during and after reading activities to help with reading comprehension and language acquisition. Before reading activities help prepare the reader for potential difficulties while it aims to support the overall text and its’ meaning. These activities will access student schema where they will be able to build on the knowledge they already have to obtain new language. Siyi would have benefited from before reading activities that included culture appreciation and inclusion. This would have engaged her in the readings and would have helped develop academic content on what she already knows. Bringing her prior knowledge and language into the curriculum would allow her to connect to new curriculum and academic literacies (Gibbons, 2009). Klinger states that “allowing students to explore how content learning informs and connects with their own lives and local community can increase interest and motivation in authentic critical thinking and problem-solving in content area classes” (Kinger, p.40, 2012). A useful before reading activity that would allow Siyi to talk about her culture would be to write and share a personal narrative about her Chinese culture. Siyi expresses interest in her Chinese culture by being enrolled in AP Chinese. Mrs. Bricco should embrace that knowledge and build her lessons to accommodate students like Siyi. This will make Mrs. Bricco a genuine and likeable teacher for her EL students. Previewing the text and providing some vocabulary words prior to reading will also help Siyi and all other students who are struggling with the reading and comprehension process. Giving the vocabulary words before the readings will not only help students to understand the text but will also give them confidence while reading.

Mrs. Bricco could also incorporate during reading activities to assist with text comprehension. As mentioned by Gibbons (2009), “during reading activities aim to make explicit the unconscious processes and practices that fluent readers use” (p.92). In Siyi’s case, she didn’t comprehend the readings. When asked to read out loud, Siyi didn’t know where they had left off in the book and had to ask a friend for help. After she finished reading, she was asked to give a summary on the vignette. Siyi was wrong on a few major details. During reading activities will help Siyi understand the purpose of the text, recognize how the text is organized, and help her focus her attention on the text. Pause and predict would be a good activity to make sure Siyi is comprehending what she is reading. Furthermore, it will allow Mrs. Bricco to assess Siyi and further help her with the readings. Additionally, a during reading activity such as identifying paragraph parts would also be helpful. It would allow students to identify how writing is structured and it would nicely segue into their next lesson about writing an academic paper.

Integrating different types of after reading activities would also allow Siyi to make use of the text to build on her language development. The knowledge she acquires can be used to help her focus more deeply and critically about a text. (Gibbons, 2009). Sentence reconstruction would be a good activity for Siyi since she is a lower EL learner. Often times, Siyi copies sentences word for word and if asked to construct a sentence on her own, she has trouble reconstructing complex sentences. Breaking down sentences and having her reconstruct them would help focus her attention on word order. This activity will also provide scaffolding for the writing lesson and will help with sentence structure. As a teacher, Mrs. Bricco must be willing to adapt her curriculum and provide scaffolding for students. These changes can help improve an ELL’s language acquisition and help them develop content specific literacies in class.

***How to Improve on Writing***

Students must be challenged but still able to reach obtainable goals. The PowerPoint on writing and the worksheet Mrs. Bricco assigned was too challenging for Siyi, so it caused her to be defiant during this particular lesson. She did not want to do the work and gave Mrs. Bricco attitude when asked to write a particular Power Point slide in her own words. Mrs. Bricco could have done a number of things to help Siyi understand the lesson on writing and to help her gain new language and sustain academic rigor. The lesson was not clear to her because there was no instruction given prior to the lesson; this was needed for Siyi to understand how to write an academic paper. All students had a hard time understanding how text dependent questions related to writing. From the worksheet, it looked like the students had previously gone over text dependent questions, and the teacher assumed the student knew how to use those questions to write a topic sentence and a supporting paragraph; however, it was apparent that the students needed more instruction before doing this lesson.

Reading, examining, and analyzing a short essay as a class would have been a great way to model what students need to do to write an academic paper. Going through an essay together would allow the teacher to ask text dependent questions and highlight the topic sentences for each paragraph. As for the lesson Mrs. Bricco taught, there was a need to incorporate scaffolding into her lesson to establish equity and assist English language learners like Siyi. Scaffolding will help improve Siyi’s language acquisition by giving her guided support to access the quality curriculum she needs to acquire language. According to Gibbons, scaffolding is temporary help that assists new learners with obtaining new knowledge and it enables a learner to “know how to do something” (Gibbons p.15, 2009). It is also future oriented meaning teachers must “move toward academic language” (Gibbons, P.60, 2009). In Mrs. Bricco’s assignment, there was no moving towards academic language. She left the worksheet blank and assumed students could write the notes in their own words. Instead of writing the notes in her own words, Siyi copied her classmates’ sentences because she was unable to build her own. This was not a learning experience for Siyi and was instead a hindering experience. Instead of having students explain and write the PowerPoint in their own words, Mrs. Bricco could have supported students by giving them sentence frames to show them how to put someone else’s idea into their own words. She could have gradually made the sentence frames harder, ultimately removing them towards the end of the worksheet. This would have allowed her students to move towards academic language. Giving Siyi vocabulary prior to the lesson would have also benefited her during this lesson. She would have had the knowledge and language needed to understand the PowerPoints and would have been able to use that in her writings. Instead, Siyi took a lot of time researching words to understand the meaning. This took away from her academics and put her behind on the assignment. This caused her to copy a friend’s paper. Giving Siyi vocabulary prior to the lesson would have helped her finish her assignment on her own.

**Conclusion**

As a future educator, I have learned a lot about how teachers should approach teaching for diverse learners. It was obvious that Siyi needed support from her teacher to help her learn English and gain academic literacy. Teachers should take time to be inclusive of all cultures, so students can use their prior knowledge and schema to gain new knowledge and language. Even if a text is talking about a specific culture, it is still important to allow students time to talk about theirs. I also learned that scaffolding should be designed and planned, and educators should make a conscious effort to include them in their lessons. There were a number of opportunities where scaffolding could have been including in each lesson I observed. Connecting new information to prior experiences, giving students’ academic vocabulary before the lesson, using graphic organizers, and using sentence frames are all techniques that could have been included for Siyi. As a future educator, I plan to use designed scaffolding in my curriculum to ensure that students lessons are amplified and designed with opportunities to help them acquire language. Furthermore, I will be inclusive of all students, making sure to provide a stress-free learning environment so they can acquire and produce language when ready.