

Language Learning of Native American Students

By following several simple precepts, teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students can enhance language learning.

Native Americans generally do not fare well in schools provided by the dominant society. They achieve at low levels and have high dropout rates. And the longer Indian students remain in school, the wider becomes the gap between their achievement and that of the majority population.

Certainly, cultural barriers between home and school are partly responsible for these problems. More specifically, however, language differences are a major stumbling block to school progress.

Many Indian tribes still use their native language. On the Navajo reservation, for example, approximately one-fourth of the children entering school speak Navajo only; and many of the pupils with some facility in English are Navajo-dominant. Since the Navajo language differs markedly from English, the task of acquiring English as a second language can be an onerous one.¹

Communication skills are vital to school achievement, as we know: and oral language facility is prerequisite to success in reading and writing. Indian children who lack English language facility find school destructive to their self-images and levels of aspiration.

Observing Classrooms

I recently conducted a research project to determine the factors that promote oral language development among Native American pupils. I observed 50 kindergarten and primary classrooms in both reservation and non-reservation schools serving mainly Native American students in two Southwestern states.

For the purposes of this study, I defined an optimum language learning environment as one in which the use of oral and written language is encouraged in a variety of settings; where the quantity and quality of language is appropriate for the age and grade level of pupils; and where pupils

are active participants. Using a five-point scale, I rated classrooms on the degree to which these characteristics were evident.

I used a tape recorder to gather several samples of pupils' language during the 15 minutes I spent in each classroom. Later, I analyzed each sample using the Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) technique. I then related the rating of each classroom to the quality and quantity of pupils' speech during the observation.

Enhancing Language Learning

As a result of this research, I have several recommendations that may be helpful to teachers of Native American pupils and to others who work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

First, provide an open and informal classroom with a supportive psychological climate. I found that the type of classroom organization that enhanced language learning was informal: classroom furniture was arranged flexibly, and group work was encouraged. Pupils were relaxed and eager to express themselves.

Second, allow students to share control. Opportunities to make choices and to assume responsibility for one's

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actions blend well with the child-rearing practices of many traditional Native American families. In the classrooms I observed, when Indian pupils shared the locus of control with the teacher, language learning was enhanced; many opportunities arose for use of language in the development of social skills based on a model of democratic living.

Third, use cooperative learning techniques. Traditionally, Indians are reared to value cooperation and sharing. The Native American child is not programmed culturally to "go it alone." He or she is most comfortable in a group setting where warm personal relationships exist. Thus I was not surprised to find that the language development of pupils was enhanced in classrooms where cooperative learning took place.

Next, avoid large-group, formal lessons in the lecture-recitation mode. Native American pupils tend to withdraw when the dialogue pattern is formal. In classrooms where the teacher called upon students for a comment or response to a question but did not encourage dialogue among students, pupils produced less complex speech. Encourage student-to-student dialogue and group problem-solving whenever possible.

In addition, use culturally relevant materials and learning experiences. For culturally and linguistically diverse pupils such as the Native American population, the language program must enhance pupils' self-concept and prideful identity if it is to be effective. Make sure the classroom reflects this culture with displays of pictures, books, articles, and the like that are consistent with the home life of students. Avoid cross-cultural behavioral comparisons and judgments.

Because the teacher often is a "significant other" in the lives of children, use encouragement and positive reinforcement in liberal amounts. Employ language-lifting techniques and modeling of correct language patterns, but refrain from correcting pupils' oral language errors—except during formal language lessons. Listen to what pupils have to say and praise efforts

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(the process) rather than focusing on the product.

Finally, to plan a language program that addresses the specific needs of pupils, determine where pupils are with respect to where they should be at the end of the year. Tape-record segments of students' speech in a variety of settings; then listen analytically. The more successful language programs are those that teachers have modified to fit the specific needs of their students. Language goals for the year may remain unchanged; but intermediate objectives, along with the materials and activities selected to meet those objectives, must be based on the sound professional judgment of the teacher.

The Best Sociocultural Context

To help Native American students succeed in school, educators must pay attention to the sociocultural context in which language learning—indeed all learning—takes place. A supportive context will enable Native Americans to make a significant contribution to the mainstream while retaining their sense of identity within their own culture. □

1. Statistics are based on interviews with Navajo administrators.

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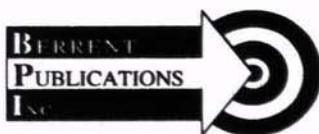
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