Multilingual Learners in College Classrooms: Findings and Implications
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Language Acquisition

• The acquisition of language and academic literacies is a long-term, evolving process.

• It is counterproductive to conflate linguistic ability with intellectual competence. Students can undertake complex academic tasks—and make original contributions to the disciplines they are studying—even when second language features of writing persist.

• We cannot make safe predictions on the basis of students’ testing results or early performance in college courses. Even students whose initial college experiences are marked by failure, frustration, and fear can make progress and excel.

The Context of Learning

• Language and literacy are situated in particular classroom contexts and are acquired while engaging with the subject matter and tasks within these contexts.

• Students’ performance and progress in college classrooms is inextricably linked to course-specific factors and conditions.

• Students develop strategies over time for approaching academic work in the very process of struggling to understand new and unfamiliar material.

The Role of Writing across the Curriculum

• Writing can provide a powerful means of
  o making sense of ideas
  o generating ideas
  o making connections
  o analyzing ideas
  o taking risks with unfamiliar language
  o constructing new knowledge.
• Writing promotes language acquisition.
• Writing can become a springboard for a student’s class participation.
• Writing can provide faculty with insight into students’ thoughts and analyses.

The Role of Faculty across the Curriculum

• Faculty across disciplines play a critical role in fostering students’ ongoing acquisition as learners, readers, writers, and language users. They enable students’ progress and confidence when they:
  o view students’ contributions as valuable to the work of the course
  o view students’ struggles as a mark of learning in progress
- build on students’ understanding
- provide students with multiple, ongoing opportunities for engaging with unfamiliar material and tasks
- provide meaningful, timely input in response to students’ work
- view the issues that arise out of linguistic diversity not as problems but as opportunities for faculty development and student learning.

**Addressing Error**

1. **Prioritize your concerns.** It makes sense to address larger issues of the development and organization of ideas before addressing matters of error. Explain to students what your priorities are and why you have decided to respond in this way.

2. **View errors as a sign of learning.** Errors may seem to indicate a lack of seriousness or commitment, but they are likely to occur even when students have worked quite diligently and carefully on their writing. Errors are inevitable in the process of acquiring an additional language (both English and the academic language of the course).

3. **Provide multiple opportunities for informal writing before a formal paper is due.** Errors may occur because of the complexity of issues students are trying to juggle while writing their papers.

4. **Provide in-class time for proofreading, at least once.** Students need to learn the literate behavior of rereading for “performance errors”: errors that are slips that students can control once they can focus on them. Using part of one class period to allow students to edit their papers before handing them in provides this learning opportunity.

5. **Guide students to read their texts aloud on their own.** What students have written (as an error) is not necessarily the way they would speak it. Written errors are often corrected by students when they have an opportunity to read their texts aloud.

6. **Avoid shorthand markings.** Many errors indicate what a student doesn’t yet understand, or they reveal a partial or erroneous understanding. But these errors, as problematic as they seem, are usually systematic and logically derived. Consequently, corrective feedback rarely works when the feedback takes the form of inexplicit, vague, coded, or abbreviated marks or comments (e.g., “frag,” “verb tense,” “comma splice”). Shorthand markings make sense only if the writer already knows the way the grammar works. They don’t address the [linguistic] hypotheses the students have formulated.

7. **Limit the number and type of errors you address.** Less is more. Rather than trying to address or correct all errors, which is likely to overwhelm both you and the students, read through a student’s text and try to locate prominent or recurring patterns of error and help students understand those.

8. **Evaluate students’ work over time.** It helps to have a long view on students’ increasing control of language. Rather than worrying about every text and the errors that have yet to be addressed, look at a student’s work over time to get a sense of and appreciation for the progress a student has made.