Scaffolding Success

Five Principles for Succeeding with Adolescent English Learners:
An Interview with *Aída Walqui*

Aída Walqui, director of the Teacher Professional Development Program at WestEd, is the author with Leo van Lier, Professor of Educational Linguistics at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, of a new book addressing the education of English learners in middle school and high school. Based on sociocultural theory, sociolinguistics, and classroom research, the book, *Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise*, takes readers inside some of the classrooms where Walqui and WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) project have worked to instill five principles into the instruction that supports English learners.

In the interview below, Walqui explains the importance of instructional principles for teachers' increased professional expertise and impact on their students' learning. Additionally, excerpts from the book outline the five QTEL principles and how educators can recognize them in practice.

Q: In your new book, you discuss why it is important for teachers to have explicit principles that guide their teaching. What in your own teaching led you to this conclusion?

Walqui: The richest professional experience I've had, one I continue to reflect on and learn from, was my time as a teacher at Alisal High School in Salinas, California. Intuitively, it was my style to challenge students, which also meant supporting them to

rise to my expectations. For the most part I felt successful. I could see my students growing intellectually, socially, and linguistically. At the same time, I often made mistakes. So, I became metacognitive about my own teaching. For example, I reflected on the way I conducted lessons, why I did not follow the book in a sequential way, why I needed to design specific activities, and how the students responded — badly or well — to specific episodes of my teaching. I also visited fellow teachers to observe their teaching, to learn. Sometimes I would observe two different teachers who were both excellent but their teaching looked quite different, and I wondered about that. Sometimes I would observe a lesson focused on superficial ideas

or a lesson where a student's role was limited to listening to the teacher or filling in work sheets. It was clear to me that these were examples of poor teaching. But what guided my ability to make decisions about the value of those classes?

I realized the importance of being explicit about my theory of teaching and learning. I found that I could abstract principles from concrete instances of teaching to tease out guiding characteristics. By being explicit about what to me constituted accomplished teaching, I could talk about it with colleagues, elaborate on it, evaluate it, and continuously refine it. I came to see carefully elaborated principles as the cornerstone of informed practice, and the way we grow as teachers.

Q: How did you arrive at the five principles that guide WestEd's QTEL project? (See the box on page 26 *Principles and Goals for Succeeding with English Language Learners*.)

Walqui: In 2003, my teammates in the QTEL program and I started to work in New York City. Our main charge was to develop the expertise of district colleagues who would be the professional developers and coaches of teachers who worked with English Learners. We needed guidelines to help focus on what we considered the essentials of teaching English Learners.

Based on our experiences observing classes, we described what we knew about the characteristics of good teaching. We then sorted out specific descriptors and categorized them. For example, we agreed that good teaching engaged students in establishing connections between and across key ideas of the theme being learned; then we sorted out "connections," "engagement," and "key ideas." We further sorted "connections" and "key ideas" together, into a category that grew and eventually became our principle related to "academic rigor." We sorted "engagement" into a category that grew and became our principle related to "quality interactions." In this way, we arrived at five principles that we could explicitly unpack. We also compared them to other principles available in the literature to see what kinds of organizers other educators had used, what lenses they had brought to their work that we might be missing. In the process, we especially liked the

principles from the *Productive Pedagogies* in Queensland, Australia, and their concept of rich tasks. "Tasks" became an important way for us to organize our ideas about our principle related to "quality curriculum."

Our principles have resulted in a public document about quality education that provides teachers with a clear focus for designing and enacting instruction; for collaborating with others; and for assessing, independently and jointly, the development of their expertise to work with English Learners and all other students.

In 2004, working in collaboration with Ofelia García, who was then a professor at Teachers College, we designed an observational instrument based on the QTEL principles and their operationalization. The principles and the instrument point in the same direction: It is a teacher's job to take the immense potential that students bring to the classroom and transform it into reality by scaffolding students' access to the high-challenge tasks teachers invite them to engage in.

Q: Is there one principle that you want to make a special case for, one that might be the key to working with English Learners?

Walqui: The centerpiece of our work is the principle related to "quality interaction," because it subsumes all that we believe is essential for learning. If a teacher can design activities that help students interact around key ideas — connecting them, critiquing them, building on them, using them to solve problems — then although the focus is on the interaction, all other principles are equally involved and students are constructing and generating new knowledge.

Q: How do you hope readers will respond to the ideas you offer below and in your book?

Walqui: I know sometimes teachers think that theory is not relevant to them, that what they need to become better teachers is more ideas to improve their practice. However, I agree with the psychologist Kurt Lewin: "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." Theories help us describe and understand what we do, they can help us establish solid principles and practices, and they give us a sense of strength, focus, and direction. In accomplished teaching, theory and practice are inseparable.

Principle One: Sustain Academic Rigor

The fact that learners are learning English does not mean they are incapable of tackling complex subject matter concepts in this new language. Simply put: Do not dumb down the academic challenge for English language learners. Instead, support them so that they can access and engage with high-level subject matter content.

The first goal in sustaining academic rigor is to promote deep disciplinary knowledge: What are the key ideas in a subject area, the deep connections between and across facts related to those core ideas, the basic conceptual structure of the discipline, the processes valued in the field, and the preferred ways of expressing them? This kind of search for integration and connection may have been uncommon in teachers' own training and practice (Elmore, 1996), so it requires teachers' critical reflection on their own experiences as learners, to reconceptualize disciplinary knowledge, to rethink how to support students' understanding of core disciplinary ideas and processes, and to socialize learners into the discipline (Shulman, 1987). Teachers sustain academic rigor by keeping the focus clear: main themes appear time and again, as leitmotifs, and each time they reappear, students' understanding should deepen.

Two other goals for sustaining academic rigor — to engage students in generative disciplinary concepts and skills and to engage students in generative cognitive skills (higher-order thinking) — can be illustrated with a simple example. English language learners need to be invited to combine ideas, to synthesize, to compare and contrast, and so forth. It's true that, in many cases, they may not have the language to do so on their own, but if provided with useful expressions and carefully guided choices, they can begin to apprentice into the language and make sense of the concepts. This should happen even in the beginning ESL class. If students can say, "This is a square," and, "That is a triangle," they can also be helped to understand and say, "This figure is a square because it has four sides, while that figure is a triangle because it has three sides."

The idea that teachers can focus their instruction on central ideas and deepen stu-

Principles and Goals for Succeeding with English Language Learners	
Principles	**Goals**
Sustain Academic Rigor	Promote deep disciplinary knowledge Engage students in generative disciplinary concepts and skills
	Engage students in generative cognitive skills (higher-order thinking)
Hold High Expectations	Engage students in tasks that provide high challenge and high support
	Engage students (and teachers) in the development of their own expertise Make criteria for quality work clear to all
Engage Students in Quality Interactions	Engage students in sustained interactions with teacher and peers
	Focus interactions on the construction of knowledge
Sustain a Language Focus	Promote language learning in meaningful contexts Promote disciplinary language use
	Amplify rather than simplify communications
	Address specific language issues judiciously
Develop Quality Curriculum	Structure opportunities to scaffold learning, incorporating the goals above

© 2010 WestEd

dents' understanding over time also dispenses with the common complaint that it is not possible to teach everything in the curriculum. The point is, no one should try. It's not good pedagogy. If students understand the central concepts that make up the core of a discipline and the main ways these concepts are interrelated, they will then be able to anchor and build other understandings; they will generate new knowledge.

Principle Two:
Hold High Expectations

In the classic study of the "Pygmalion effect" (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1966), teachers were given a list of students whose IQ tests supposedly showed they were about to enter an intellectual "spurt;" teachers paid these more "promising" students more attention, and the students performed better than expected. However, what the teachers did not know was that the students had been assigned to the list on a purely random basis. In other words, the differences in the students' performance were based purely on the teacher's treatment, which, in turn, was based on the teacher's expectations as

derived from the fictitious list. This study, and others like it, should serve as a powerful reminder of the influence of expectations on performance, in both the long and short term. If we (as individual teachers, as a school system, or as a nation) treat English language learners as incapable of succeeding academically, or, worse, if we regard them as somehow deficient (lazy, unintelligent, or whatever), then these students must fight against vastly increased odds.

However, it won't be enough to swap low expectations for high expectations if we don't also provide the high levels of support that we know English language learners will need. This is distinct from differentiating instruction in ways that attempt to address students' diverse needs by creating separate lesson plans for English language learners, native speakers of English, struggling readers, and so on. The QTEL approach is to differentiate within the same complex activities. The goal is to engage all students in the same tasks, designed with the same objectives, to provide high challenge and high support regardless of students' differences. For example, a jigsaw project can be structured to involve

small groups in addressing the same topic (brain function, say) with the same questions, but the subtopics (different cases of brain injury) and level of the reading assignments can be differentiated. What is not differentiated is the task itself or the core concepts. In such a jigsaw project, every student is carefully assigned to two different kinds of groups: an "expert" group and a "base" group. First, in expert groups, students work together to become expert about their particular subtopic. Then, in base groups, students from different expert groups meet to exchange and compare what they learned — about the same core concept.

In the example above, the structure of the activity clearly communicates that all students are considered capable of learning the same ideas and that all students are expected to grow intellectually. (Conversely, giving students different tasks that do not appear to be of equal importance communicates that the teacher may not believe all members of the class community can achieve.)

It almost goes without saying that if we are going to have high expectations for students, they need to have clear understanding of what those expectations are and the criteria by which they will be assessed. The explicitness of these criteria enables students to self-monitor and correct and, thus, to improve their own performances. Rubrics are one straightforward way to communicate expectations. Additionally, rubrics support students in developing the important metacognitive skill of self-assessment.

Principle Three:
Engage English Language Learners in Quality Interactions

Here is the principle that QTEL has found to be the key to all work with English learners. By our definition, quality interactions focus on the sustained joint construction of knowledge. In some instances the interactions are between the teacher and learner; many other times, the teacher designs and monitors interactions that take place among students. We want all students, and English learners in particular, to construct new knowledge by engaging in interactions that pursue understanding, enhance it, problematize[1] central ideas, propose counter arguments, debate, and reach some sort of conclusion.

Consider, for example, the interactions included here on this page from a high

school ESL classroom. Students are beginning a linguistics unit and have investigated several questions about language, including whether animals have language.

Throughout this discussion, students' sustained interactions build toward coherence and jointly constructed understanding. In summarizing the discussion, the teacher alerts students to the academic sophistication of their work together and provides a way for them to think about the origins of their arguments in the fields of linguistics and zoology. For an observer of this classroom, the interactions between teacher and students and among students clearly meet the definition of "high quality."

Principle Four:
Sustain a Language Focus

Teaching a class with English Language Learners means that every lesson, regardless of the subject area, becomes a language lesson to some extent. The teacher has to take into account that English language learners not only need to cope with the cognitive aspects of a lesson, but also will struggle with language issues — with grammar and vocabulary, listening comprehension, taking notes, and so on. Even for English Language Learners who have a good level of oral proficiency in everyday communication and conversation, the academic language of disciplinary discourse almost always presents problems.

However, a focus on language does not have to be in the form of grammar rules or memorization of vocabulary. Nor does it require simplification of the often-complex language of academic disciplines. The best approach to sustaining a language focus in subject matter classes incorporates three goals: to focus on language issues in meaningful contexts and activities, to amplify students' access to the academic language they need to learn, and to focus judiciously on explicit language issues.

Meaningful contexts begin at the genre level. All students should be helped to deconstruct disciplinary genres: What is the purpose of this text? What do I know about the structure of this type of text? What tends to come first, follow, and then conclude it? What patterns of academic language use are typical (e.g., describing, explaining, justifying)? What kind of language is typical (e.g., connectors, preferred verb tenses, nominal-

Student 1: I found from my research that animal communication is not a language. Animal communication is different from the human communication because, in case of dolphins, they communicate through ultrasonic pulses that cannot be heard by the human ear.

Student 2: She says that animal communication is not a language. It IS a language, that's what I think. Because they communicate with each other.

Student 1: But they don't think.

Student 2: A characteristic in the language, you can have words, sounds, and everything...

Student 1: But they don't have words. They don't say "mama."

Student 2: In animal language are some of the characteristics that you said are there, so...it is a language.

Teacher: Julio is arguing very strongly that animal communication is a form of, is language. Lavinia's saying it's not. What do you think would be a way to help them resolve that argument in their writing?

Student 1: Similarities in the...I mean they have sound, both of them. Because we have sound and animals have sound, but they don't have lexis, they don't have grammar.

Student 3: I hear people say that animals they understand everything, but only thing they don't do is they don't speak. So, that's the only thing (inaudible) they understand like humans do.

Student 4: Look, if you want to say, "Excuse me" (makes sound of clearing his throat to demonstrate that sounds can replace words to communicate), "huh, huh."

Student 1: They don't say, "Excuse me."

Student 4: Same thing, sound.

Teacher: Hold on, hold on. Angela has something.

Student 5: What I want to say, because they don't talk, but they communicate by doing signs, so they do not need to speak to communicate to others. So I think that's a language.

Teacher: A lot is going to depend on how you define language, okay? You can define it in such a way as to exclude what animals do; you can define it in a very broad way, as a system of communication that includes everything. You are going to find linguists and zoologists who disagree. And if you get interested, I can give you some readings that were in the journal Science last year, people arguing back and forth, calling one another names because they disagreed on this issue....

(DeFazio and Walqui, 2001)

izations)? Formulaic expressions, too, can be seen as a particular aspect of genre, as specific ways to conduct academic discussions, report laboratory findings, or present an historical claim, for example.

Teaching with a language focus also means recognizing concepts and terms that will need to be amplified for English learners. Even more important is recognizing and amplifying learners' access to concepts, with language as the touchstone. "Short" circuits, for example, will need to be read about, discussed, drawn, discussed, constructed, discussed, and so forth.

It is not always the teacher who focuses on language in subject matter classes, of course. Learners will often take the initiative

as they engage with challenging texts and activities. When they encounter particular problems that need to be resolved, they will naturally focus on language and attempt to figure out how to assign meaning and make sense of the subject matter. The teacher —- and other learners — need to understand that learners can often find the solution to their linguistic problems by discussing them with each other or by targeted guidance from their teacher (see, for example, Donato, 1994; Brooks, Donato, and McGlone, 1997; and Swain and Lapkin, 2000).

The key to a language focus is not to add short grammar lessons or vocabulary quizzes but to engage learners in challenging and meaningful activities and projects and find

ways of dealing effectively with the language problems that inevitably come up, in the context of those meaningful and relevant activities and projects. A teacher's initial concern needs to be with fluency in production. If the text required is a written text, essential considerations are whether students understand the purpose of the assignment and the genre (Is this going to be an argumentative essay? A family letter? A compare-and-contrast essay? A description?). Then, the teacher needs to pay attention to whether students have ideas to present as they engage in the task of writing, and whether they connect these ideas logically, building a clear argument. In a first draft, students may commit grammatical or spelling errors, or they may use the same word several times. During a revision, and once the teacher is assured that students know what the intended text is supposed to do for readers, the teacher may focus on complexity. At this point, the teacher may help students combine simple sentences into complex ones by linking them

with the appropriate connectors. The teacher could also invite students to look for synonyms to replace a term that has been overused. Finally, a last review will focus on the most minimal aspect of the text; spelling. Ideally, academic and linguistic work should flow seamlessly together and not constitute two separate, unrelated kinds of work.

Principle Five:
Develop a Quality Curriculum
The principle that quality teaching for English learners requires quality curriculum necessarily draws attention to the limitations of subject matter textbooks, especially in the instruction of English learners. We are not suggesting that teachers throw out their textbooks, but it is clear that to scaffold the development of students' subject matter knowledge, cognitive skills, and language in ways described so far, the textbook can never be a complete curriculum.

Accordingly, whether teachers intend to modify, supplement, or replace textbook les-

sons or units, five basic design factors are particularly appropriate when developing instructional materials for English learners: setting long-term goals and benchmarks, using a problem-based approach (which invites students to think and act as they would in solving real-world problems) with increasingly interrelated lessons, using a spiraling progression, making connections between how the subject matter is relevant to the present and future lives of students and their communities), and building on students' lives and experiences by drawing from the funds of knowledge that students and their communities posses. Whether anchored in textbook or teacher-designed lessons and units, quality curriculum must incorporate the learners' lives and experiences, the context in which they live, and the multilinguistic and multicultural composition of the classroom, school, and community.

In Conclusion

Five principles can be said to guide the development and enactment of quality instruction for English language learners. In shorthand, these principles call for academic rigor, high expectations, quality interactions, a language focus, and quality curriculum. QTEL has derived these principles from classroom experience; close observation of teachers and learners; sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic theory; and research. By making these principles explicit, we, like any other educators, are able to monitor and assess our own performance, communicate about our principles with others, and modify our principles as reflection and interaction with others warrant.

   This discussion is based on *Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise*, by Aída Walqui and Leo van Lier, © 2010 by WestEd.

References

Brooks, F., Donato, R., & McGlone, J. (1997). "When are They Going to Say 'It' Right? Understanding Learner Talk during Pair-Work Activity" *Foreign Language Annals*, 30(4), 524-541.
DeFazio, A., & Walqui, A. (2001). *Where Do You Want to Go Next?* [DVD] San Francisco: WestEd.
Donato, R. (1994). "Collective Scaffolding" in J. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research* (pp. 33-56). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishers.
Elmore, R. F. (1996). "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practices" *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 1-25.
Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* New York: Cambridge University Press.
Norton Peirce, B. (1995). "Social Identity, Investment and Language Learning" *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9-31.
Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1966). "Teachers' Expectancies: Determinates of Pupils' IQ Gains" *Psychological Reports*, 19, 115-118.
Shulman, L. (1987). "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform" *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 114-35.
Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2000). Task-based Second Language Learning: The Uses of the First Language. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 251-274.

[1] Problematization, as introduced in Paulo Freire's pedagogy, involves the learner in taking a critical stance, questioning the intent and value of central ideas: who is making a statement, why, for whose benefit, and to whose detriment. Problematization is especially powerful for English Language Learners because it carries with it a feeling of control and legitimacy: "I have ideas to communicate, I am a speaker in my own right." (Kramsch, 1993; Norton Pierce, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991).