Introduction

Bell Multicultural is a high school located in Washington, D.C. with a predominantly language minority student population. A considerable number of these students are recent immigrants to this country, requiring English as a Second or Other Language instruction. Academic transition for these students is facilitated through sheltered content classes during their first year at Bell. Sheltered content is an alternative to Bilingual Education programs, having the advantage of making content courses such as math and science accessible to students while simultaneously working to improve their English language skills. Because the student population at Bell does not consist entirely of ELL’s, these classes have also been used as remediation for students with full English proficiency.

I taught two sections of a sheltered content pre-algebra course. All but four students in one class were part of the “Literacy” group, recent arrivals with limited academic skills. The exceptions were students with learning disabilities who were fluent in English, placed in these particular sections because of poor performance in past math classes. The second class consisted of a larger number of Fully-English Proficient (FEP) students who were receiving academically remediation. The remainder of the class consisted of Non-English Proficient (NEP) students who had strong academic skill.

Bell combines NEPs and FEPs on the philosophy that joining low English proficiency students and slow learners can have positive synergy effects for both groups—the English speakers take a lead in groups through their superior understanding of presentation while being helped out by the academic aspects of class. Despite the anecdotal evidence from administrators and experienced teachers that pointed toward the benefit of joining ESL and Learning disabilities students in one class, I found an affective distance between the two groups in my classes. They wanted to sit separately, work alone and in general didn’t show much interest in connecting with the members of the other group. I tried to change these attitudes using targeted teaching strategies. My classroom study examines and compares the effectiveness of these strategies in each of my two classes.

Literature

Literature on the intersection of special education and ESL focuses largely on students who bring both language and cognitive deficiencies to class. Any assessment in such classrooms, be it of content or language skills, must consider the cognitive difficulties such students face (Schiff-Myers, 1992;
Roseberry-McKibbin). My study was specifically informed by an awareness of this issue. Most literature, however, deals with practical ideas of how to address this dual issue in a classroom. Ruiz (1995) argues that instructional context instead of a medical view of the disability needs to take a primary role in constructing lessons for students. Hudson (1987) corroborates this view by arguing for a learning strategy approach to addressing students' learning needs.

My study diverges from the literature in that it focuses not on students with both language and cognitive disabilities, but on classrooms containing both NEP students who are in need of language remediation and FEP students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability.

Methods

The study had three phases. During the first phase, I observed and recorded the behavior of students in each of my classes. During the second phase, I implemented a number of teaching strategies aimed at promoting the kind of interaction that would allow students to share their relative skills. In the third and final phase, I analyzed the success of my efforts in each of the two classes.

The first phase of my study lasted about a week. During this week, I tried to affect the interaction between the NEP and FEP students as little as possible. I recorded the behavior of each student. In the second phase, I implemented two teaching strategies for a period of two weeks each. The goal of each strategy was to increase the social and academic interaction between the two groups. I recorded each student’s reaction to the strategies and categorized them as follows: involvement in academics, interactions with other students, academic performance, and self-reported interest.

The first strategy I implemented was peer tutoring. I choose this strategy because it promised to allow the NEPs and FEPs to share their relative strengths and balance out each other’s weakness. I implemented it for one half-hour skills practice session each day, making sure that the skill had a language as well as a math component. I didn’t call the pairing “peer tutoring” in class. Instead I told the paired students that they would simply be working cooperatively, but instructed that they should help each other with the language and math. In pairing Jane, a FEP, with Jose, a NEP, I told Jane to help Jose understand the English and encouraged Jose to model the use of Math for Jane.

The second strategy I implemented was mixed group work. This strategy, similar to the first, differs in that cooperation between students is more open-ended. There was no explicit instruction for students to help each other. Because of this open-ended nature, I implemented the strategy over a four-week period. Each group had three to four students, at least one of who was a FEP. The groups were assembled two-to-three times a week to complete weekly projects.

* The language barrier was overcome primarily through students modeling the work for each other. Also, a number of the FEPs were bilingual, making the tutoring easier from both ends.
Results

At the conclusion of the strategy implementation, I compared the results between the first and the second class. For each class I assessed the cumulative reaction that my students had to the teaching strategies. Table I represents a synthesis of my class notes.

Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class I</th>
<th>Class II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Involvement in academics</em></td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Significant increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Interactions with students</em></td>
<td>Very little change</td>
<td>Significant increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Academic performance</em></td>
<td>Very little change</td>
<td>Slight increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Self reported interest</em></td>
<td>Low interest</td>
<td>Significant increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first class had NEPs with low academic skill and FEPs with a solid academic background, who were receiving remediation for nonacademic reasons. My experience with both the peer tutoring and the mixed group work was very disappointing. I found that their involvement in the subject matter as well as their academic performance stayed basically unchanged as a result of the intervention. That is, students who were interested in class to begin with stayed that way and students who were disinterested did not become interested. Their social interactions changed very little and in some instances degenerated as distance and suspicion grew into resentment of being forced to work together, breaking at one point into outright hostility.

The second class had a completely different response. The interaction between the academically strong NEPs and academically weak FEPs resulted in each group experiencing a greater degree of success, leading them to become more involved in the class. Their academic performance went up only slightly, but there was a significant increase in social interactions between students.

Conclusions

The experience of teaching these two classes and attempting interventions designed to promote interaction between LEP and NEP students confirmed my initial intuition: balance is necessary to successfully combine these groups. I found that in Class II, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the students balanced out positively, whereas in Class I, they did not balance out well.
In Class I, the NEP students were weak in both their academic and English language skills, whereas the FEP students had relatively strong academic skills combined with their natural language ability. This led to a layered classroom in which the two groups became isolated from each other. My attempts to bridge this gap through the use of targeted teaching strategies largely failed. (see Chart I above).

References