Helping LEP Students Read and Understand US/Virginia Government: A Teacher Research Project

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Introduction

Helping foreign-born students understand American Government can be a very difficult task. This task becomes somewhat daunting when these students are Limited English Proficient (LEP). This teacher researcher addressed the following question: How might three LEP students with various reading levels, writing levels, and linguistic abilities be helped to succeed in a 12th grade United States/Virginia Government class? Making audio tapes of the class textbook was the primary method employed to meet this challenge. While looking into a solution to this perplexing problem, I came up with many more unanswered questions and challenging obstacles. This paper attempts to chronicle these emerging questions in an effort to open a dialogue and to encourage further research in this area.

Background

I am a first year teacher in a suburban high school in Fairfax County, Virginia. My school is unique within the school system in that it is one of the most diverse schools in the county. While many of our children are at-risk, they also have much potential that skillful teachers can develop.

My school is primarily composed of students with very different international connections (approximately 70 different countries are represented). There are 30 different home languages found at my school. The English Second Language (ESL) Department is bigger than our English Department. 53% of our students qualifying for free or reduced priced lunch. My school, on paper, looks more like an urban school than a suburban school within one of the best school districts in the country. Upon looking at our standardized test scores, one can see the need for many of our students, particularly ESL students, to be given additional help with literacy skills, especially because of the testing for state Standards of Learning (SOL's). It is important to note that, because of the needs of our student population, much has already been done at my school to help our students succeed.

For this research project, I worked with three of my senior LEP students in my government class. Each comes from a different country and background. One student, a female, is from Somalia and has been in our country for less than two years. Another is a male from Panama who has been attending school in Fairfax County since eighth grade. The last student is from Vietnam. He is highly proficient in his home language (as is displayed in his job as a Vietnamese language teacher during his after school hours). He has also shown great skill in
math and in technology, having been enrolled in an International Baccalaureate math course.

Each of these students is in a different class from the other, so the only time they were brought together is when we met as a team after school. Yet all three shared in their desire to do well in my class and graduate from high school. All three were conscientious students, paying attention in class, trying to participate, and despite their efforts, failed continuously to make passing grades in my class.

I must admit that I pride myself on teaching a challenging course of study. I am confident that my students will have a very thorough knowledge of their government when they have completed my course. But with these three students, I was brought to a perplexing state of awareness early into the school year. How might I go about making sense of a topic that is uniquely Western and uniquely American to students who are neither Western nor American? It was not *their* form of government, and in some cases, was very different from any government they might have ever known.

**My Research Question**

During my project, my research question underwent several changes since I began this project. At first, I wanted to determine how I could help these three pass my class. Later my efforts were redirected to helping make sense of this content area to students who come from three different backgrounds. I began my research by checking the readability of my textbook and by testing my students’ reading levels with the help of our reading specialist (who has aided me in understanding various issues that have come up over the course of this research). The text was at about an eighth grade reading level, well within the grasp of most of my mainstream students.

Upon closer examination, we found that my Panamanian student is at an eighth grade recognition level and a fifth grade instructional level. He needed help with "front loading" (taping his existing prior knowledge in order to make his newly acquired knowledge comprehensible), graphic organizers, and comprehending words he encountered as he read. Our reading specialist concluded that based on his current levels, his English 11 and US History classes were not addressing his level of comprehension.

When assessing the reading comprehension level of my Vietnamese student, we found him to be at a ninety-percent third grade (thirty-percent fourth grade recognition level and a second grade instructional level). At twenty years of age, he has repeated several grades and is still struggling with material that he has worked with before. At the beginning of the year, I along with his other teachers, found it very difficult to understand his spoken English. Many of his teachers would not ask him to speak in class because no one understood what he was saying. He seemed to use few decoding skills, demonstrated little or no fluency while reading, and had little comprehension of what he is reading. He was trying to survive my class by following class lectures and learning from any visuals presented. When I offered to let him use his notes and/or his textbook on his test and quizzes, he still performed at the same level as without them.
My Somalian student’s recognition and instructional levels were the same as my Panamanian student. She needed help in comprehending words she encountered when reading, accurately portraying her thoughts into writing, and asking clarifying questions when encountering concepts she did not understand.

Taking all of the issues of these three students into account, I pondered whether explicit instruction in phonemic awareness coupled with additional individualized instruction in government would help these three students. We began with after-school tutoring two days a week: one day on government content only for approximately one hour, and one day with phonemic awareness activities (forty-five minutes) and government content (forty-five minutes).

Since the students were still enrolled in my regular class, we needed to account for the ninety minutes every other day that they would be in the room with my other students who were not struggling as they were. Therefore, we began working on putting their textbook chapters on tape. Our reading specialist brought to my attention research done by Dr. Marie Carbo (1986) on the effectiveness of books on tape for students struggling with poor reading skills. We had the students listen to their chapters three times as is prescribed in Carbo’s method, recording their own reading of the chapter after completing the listening. Then they would work with me after school, using more individualized instruction, graphic organizers, and vocabulary reinforcement. The phonemic awareness program we utilized is called Language (1995). For a while, all seemed to be moving along slowly, but surely. I was beginning to see more enthusiasm and motivation in the students. Their levels of self-confidence were slowly beginning to rise, and their beliefs that they could actually be successful through the remainder of the year became stronger.

Stumbling Blocks and Other Obstacles to Research

Several obstacles emerged early on in my research that had to be addressed. One issue was that of attendance. Since all three of my students had other commitments to attend to after school (work, family, etc.), getting a firm commitment for the out-of-class time needed for success in class was difficult. On any given day, two of the three would be able to attend. On any other day, the combination would change again. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep them all in the same place in terms of the content being covered. In addition, we began to notice that my Vietnamese student was in much worse shape than the other two students and would need additional individualized instruction with our reading coach to keep him up to par with not only my class but with all of his other content area classes. Our reading specialist began to question whether our Vietnamese student may have been additionally burdened with an undiagnosed learning disability.

Because of the problems with attendance, we decided to abandon the phonemic awareness portion of my research, noting that it would be impossible

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1 Carbo, Marie; Dunn, Rita; Dunn, Kenneth (1986) Teaching Students to Read Through Their Individual Learning Styles, New Jersey: Pretice-Hall.
to trace any success without a consistent program. We instead decided to limit my focus to the effect of the books on tape and the supplemental instruction given after school. In exchange for the phonemic awareness training, our reading specialist introduced the students to a new reading program that she hoped would help with their overall reading and comprehension skills. This program, called the Q Review Program\(^3\), tests a variety of skills such as general reading comprehension, parts of speech, categorization, and vocabulary CLOZE. As of the writing of my research findings, the students were still working on this program once a week.

Findings and Results

After working with the students for approximately three months, I found that their overall performance in my government class steadily increased. This improvement manifested itself in a variety of different ways.

First, I noticed that my students were more willing to ask clarifying questions when they came to content that they didn't understand. Prior to beginning my research, they would refrain from asking questions during class time, opting instead to remain confused and unembarrassed in front of their peers. Once we began working together as a group, they were more willing to alert me to the information that they found to be confusing and that needed further explanation. I saw this particularly in the case of my Somalian student. This struck me as significant particularly because she comes from a background that doesn't look favorably on children questioning adults. Not only would she come to me when she was unsure of something she read, but she would also come to clarify her ideas to make sure she had everything clear in her own mind. In the case of my Vietnamese student, I found that he was very aware of his improvement. He would point out to both myself and our reading coach when he understood what he was reading from his government text as well as what activities he was doing on the computer program. This metacognitive processing contributed significantly to his overall motivation and morale in my class.

Second, overall scores on homework, quizzes, and tests improved. This was particularly the case for my Somalian and Panamanian students. Since they had stronger reading and comprehension scores going into the study, they were better able to reap the benefits of reading their textbook along with the audio tape. Their reading abilities were also improved as they continued using the computer program, which in turn helped them with reading their textbooks. Since they were reading and comprehending their textbooks better, they were having an easier time comprehending the material and thus doing better on their work. At one time, after administering a test to these two particular students, I noticed them attempting to grade each other's papers while they were waiting for me to go over the answers to the test with them. I realized that their overall confidence in what they knew had greatly improved. Never before would they have undertaken such a move voluntarily. After doing some cross checking, I found that the corrections that they had made on each other's papers were almost

\(^3\) Q Gessler Company
exactly in line with my test key. I made sure to alert them to this fact, which helped to boost their awareness as well as their excitement about their improvement.

However, the homework, quiz, and test scores of my Vietnamese student did not increase as much as his peers. In fact, after the first chapter test was administered, I noticed that his test scores remained the same. This finding confused me because when asked verbally during our working sessions, he seemed to know the material much better than his score reflected. I raised this concern with our reading coach and she suggested that we re-administer the test to him. Unlike the first time, we had him read the test questions to us. Then, we asked him to rephrase the questions in his own words. What we found was that he was doing poorly on the test because he did not understand the test questions from the very beginning. We then explained what was being asked of him, making sure that he understood what we wanted to know. Once we verbally clarified the questions, he was able to answer more questions correctly than he had on his own. A plausible explanation for this could be that his overall reading comprehension level was still not high enough for him to understand the verbiage on his test. It was clear that he was comprehending the content better than when he was tested previously, which could be explained by the use of the book on tape and the supplemental instruction he was receiving. However, his ability to read the test on his own and understand what was being asked of him was still not at our desired level. We concluded that his reading comprehension would eventually reach his content comprehension as he continued to work with the computer-based reading program.

Third, all three students saw an increase in their overall reading and comprehension levels. These results can be explained primarily by the use of the Q. Review Program. On average, the students' reading levels increased by two years and their comprehension levels increased by two years. I am convinced that if the students had been exposed to this reading program much earlier in the school year, their improvements in my government class would have been greatly increased. I found that the students enjoyed working with the program, particularly how they could chart their improvement every time the used it. By running the Student Record report on the program, we were able to see in which areas the students were strong and in which areas continued work was needed. With this information, I could redirect my focus on those areas where my students needed improvement. This redirection would take place during the group instruction time we had during our after school hours.

Retrospective Questions and Considerations

As is the case in any research one chooses to undertake, the end of the research finds some answers as well as many more questions. After working with my students, I was forced to re-examine my teaching practices to see how I could do a better job of teaching this specialized population. I found that I was not sufficiently trained in English Second Language content. I had no idea what skills or abilities my students should be expected to have upon transitioning out of the program. If I had known this information earlier on in the school year, I
would have known immediately that these three students and my other students like them were more likely to struggle in my class, if for no other reason than that the textbook was well above their reading levels. Given this information, I would more than likely have opted to begin the students on the computer program from the beginning of the year. I also would have begun working with the reading coach to develop some strategies that would provide more support for my LEP learners in the classroom.

I also realized that given the reading and comprehension levels of our transitioning ESL population, their needs would more likely be best served in a transitional government class. One might argue that transitional implies "below the standard." After conducting this research, I found that this is not the case. I gave my research students the very same worksheets, quizzes and tests taken from the ancillaries of our textbook that were given to my mainstreamed students. The only difference between the two groups was the intensity of instruction and the additional projects (e.g. two formal research papers) that were given to the mainstream group and not the research group. If the LEP students were placed in a transitioning government class that took into consideration their special needs and learning styles, they too could be asked to write research papers. The only difference would be that they would need more time and structure than those students in a mainstream classroom.

What Lies Ahead For These Three LEP Students?

I am happy to note that all three of the students continued to do well throughout the remainder of the school year and graduated from JEB Stuart High School. I am confident that they have a better understanding of the American governmental system than they did in September. I am also confident that my students have gained a newly found respect for reading and learning. They also now have a better understanding of how to ask clarifying questions when they are confused and how not to remain in the dark due to embarrassment. Most importantly, these three students have regained the pride within themselves that was lost while they sat drowning in my government class. They are no longer left with the sense that they are unintelligent and can't learn. They are now empowered, confident in their abilities to succeed, knowing their limitations, and understanding what it takes to slowly eliminate those limitations from their lives. The road ahead for these three young people is promising.