Introduction

As a first year teacher I am constantly struggling to try to meet the needs of all my students. I teach two classes of low literacy learners that have completed zero to five years of interrupted schooling in their native countries. The students are from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. The students are placed in the Literacy program which instructs students in basic skills. The students remain in the program for one year in preparation for the regular four years of high school. They receive instruction in their native language, basic English, basic math, and content. I am the content teacher, which means I teach all other subjects (geography, history, and science.)

The students are all native Spanish speakers, but come with a variety of different skill levels. After many efforts to meet the needs of every learner in my classroom, I find that many students are not progressing and are not able to complete tasks without my assistance. Pre-literate learners need to be taught skills and strategies that will ensure their survival and success in high school. I have implemented various learning and teaching strategies in my classroom in order to better serve the needs of my students.

Background

Throughout the year, I have worked closely with other teachers who teach the same students. I have drawn from their expertise and have implemented their ideas into my classroom. In the beginning I was teaching, but I was not providing strategies to support their learning. Regularly meeting with the other teachers and discussing the students’ needs enabled me to define a teaching plan. Taking coursework and reading various literature also permitted me to research and establish teaching and learning strategies. The purpose of my research was to experiment and establish methods and strategies that would be useful for my students.

Scaffolding

Teaching content to English Language Learners (ELLs) is not an easy task, especially to students who have minimal prior knowledge. The language demands are high, but teachers can reduce those language demands by scaffolding. This is a way of adapting content area instruction and assessment. ELLs are more likely to succeed in the content areas when provided with scaffold
assessments at their level of language proficiency (for example, O’Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996).

The students are expected to learn scientific terminology and methods that they have never been introduced to in their native language. In a science curriculum it is imperative that a student learn the scientific method. Memorizing the steps is not the way that ELLs should learn scientific inquiry. The pupils practiced the application of the scientific method through several experiments. Through the application, the students were able to learn the steps of the scientific method. I modeled sample experiments for the students, and they had to complete various steps of the experiments. I provided the students with an outline of the experiment, and the students filled in the information for the particular experiment. When I assessed students’ knowledge through exams, I also provided scaffolding. I had a list of terms on each exam from which the students selected and linked to information they already knew.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is critical in a student’s learning process in the content areas. It encourages responsibility for learning, fosters critical thinking, and involves the students in their own learning (O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). I wanted the literacy students to see their own progress and take ownership of their learning. The concept of self-assessment was not easy for them to grasp, however, after many examples of teacher modeling most of the pupils were able to assess their own learning.

An example of a self-assessment was that I had the students fill out a checklist of the concepts that they had learned or not learned in Science. For the items that the students checked that they had learned, they had to provide a piece of work that proved mastery of the concept. This is a good preparation for preparing a portfolio which will be required of them in their high school curriculum. The learners were required to discuss their checklist and work with me. The students learned to evaluate and reflect upon their progress. This helped students feel more involved in their own growth and personally connected to the curriculum (Clemmons et al, 1993). Upon completion of the self-assessment, the students felt very proud of their work and their progress.

Organization

The literacy learners were required to maintain an organized notebook specifically for their content class. I checked their notebooks at the end of class everyday. The notebooks contained five sections: warm-ups, class notes, experiments, handouts, and homework. At first I became a little frustrated because the students were not keeping it as organized as they should. I realized what a difficult task this was for most of them. Organization was foreign to them, and it became something I focused on throughout the entire year. Organizational strategies will support their learning in every class. It creates consistency and success.
Reading Strategies

I read aloud almost every day to my classes. The students read very simple texts individually or in pairs. I attempted to expose my students to a print-rich environment and to expose them to as much reading at their levels as possible. Reading is a huge task for low-literacy learners. They need to be taught strategies to help them decipher meaning and concepts from their reading. Many students simply decode, and they are not able to move beyond that. To develop students' reading power, they need to be taught before, during, and after reading strategies (Robb, 1995).

The reading strategies that I taught the students were predicting, questioning, rereading, and tracking. Before reading a text, as a class or alone, the students would make predictions based on pictures, the title, and the words in bold. This strategy helped the students connect prior knowledge to what they were about to read. The students also questioned as they read in order to build critical thinking skills. The rereading strategy was used often because during the first couple of attempts, the learners focused on decoding. Tracking was the most successful reading strategy. This strategy helps build comprehension skills even when the students do not understand every word. For example, the student reads a paragraph, then the same paragraph is read with missing words. The student must fill in the missing words. Then the student copies the entire paragraph. The students completed this exercise with several different texts. Then they were able to move up a level. Upon reading a paragraph, the students had to answer literal questions that were easily found in the reading. This strategy will help students tackle textual reading. Even if they do not understand every word, they can still find the answers they seek. The various reading strategies will serve as a support for these struggling readers.

Conclusion

Pre-literate learners need to be strategists in order to succeed in high school. The students have missed many years of school, yet they are expected to perform at the level of their peers. The learning strategies give them the tools that they need to be self-learners. Teaching and learning these strategies were not easy, however, after much practice the students were successful. The students lacked self-confidence and many times were scared to take the risk of becoming self-learners. Once the students practiced these strategies on their own and self-assessed what they had learned, their confidence as learners soared. I will continue to teach these strategies to pre-literate learners.
References
