June 2019

Primary Teachers' Use of Communicative Strategies for Linguistically Diverse Learners: A Cross-Cultural Case Study

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Purpose

Globalization has impacted classrooms worldwide and as a result, teachers are being called on to find and implement successful communicative strategies to build the learning skills of linguistically diverse learners. The purpose of this case study was to investigate the use of communicative strategies employed by two primary grade teachers whose students' home language differed from the language of instruction. The communicative strategies examined included verbal, gestural, and other visual modes of interaction within classroom discourse to promote student learning. One school we studied was in Northern Israel and one was in New Jersey in the US. In both settings, the teachers taught lessons in a language that was not the home language of the students. In Israel, the teacher taught using the formal Modern Standard Arabic while the students were familiar only with the informal Spoken Arabic. In New Jersey, the teacher taught using English while the students were largely from Spanish-speaking homes and came to school with only a limited knowledge of English. In both cases, we were interested in understanding how the teachers used communicative strategies to communicate more effectively with their students to promote greater learning and academic success for all.

Theoretical Framework

Although there is a great deal of theoretical research (e.g., Au, 1993; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Garcia, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983) concerning best practices for diverse language learners, there is little research regarding how teachers implement these practices in their classrooms. One of the obstacles for many linguistically diverse learners is that they are

placed in classrooms where they are expected to learn content and skills using the dominant language of the school (Md-Ali, Mohd-Yusof, & Veloo, 2014), yet their teachers have no formal preparation for teaching them. This places the burden on the classroom teacher to devise ways to ensure students comprehend the content. "Talk in the classroom involves the talk of the teacher and the talk of the learners, and, as in any relationship, the one can have a deep impact on the other, for better or worse" (Henderson & Wellington, 1998, p.36). Further, Gee (2004) theorized that understanding ones 'ways with words' and 'ways of thinking and learning' are critical if learning is to occur in the classroom.

Research has demonstrated that learning academic language may be a challenge for students, particularly for linguistically diverse language learners (e.g., Barr, Eslami, & Joshi, 2012; Gee, 2004; Hakuta, 2011). Further, Gee (2004) noted that schools do not do well when teaching academic language in general because it is significantly different and tends to alienate the poor and language diverse, reinforcing the need for examining and implementing successful communicative strategies for teaching the diverse language learner. Direct vocabulary instruction has also been identified as critical for these learners because their reading ability suffers due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2008; Nagy, & Townsend, 2012).

Research pertaining to best practices for diverse language learners suggests the use of a variety of communicative strategies (e.g., Au, 1993; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Garcia, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983) specifically, visual aids (pictures, gestures, body language), intonation, modeling, demonstration, building on prior knowledge, cooperative learning, explicit vocabulary instruction, and personalization of content. Our research aimed to discover and

examine the communicative strategies employed by two primary grade teachers and was guided by the following questions:

1) What types of communicative strategies are employed by primary teachers of diverse language learners?

2) Are there commonalities in communicative strategies across content (language arts and mathematics) and contexts (US and Israel)? If so, what are they?

Methods

Participants

The data for this case study were drawn from a larger, cross-cultural study of primary grade teachers conducted in two Israeli schools and two US schools. The participants, two teachers from each school, a total of four in Israel and four in the US, were chosen by using critical sampling (Patton, 2002). The school principal chose the teachers based on their experience, professionalization in language arts and mathematics as well as their students' achievements. From this data set we discovered that two primary grade general education teachers employed communicative strategies recognized as effective in the research on teaching diverse language learners, yet they had not received any formal training in this area. Each teacher had at least ten years of classroom experience. Denise in New Jersey taught in an urban area with a high percentage of children from homes where their first language was Spanish. Mayasa in Northern Israel taught in a middle-income Arab bilingual school in which the children came to school knowing only Spoken Arabic (informal) but were taught Modern Standard Arabic (formal) as well as in Hebrew.

Data Sources

In order to study the multiple and complex interactions between and across contexts, we selected a qualitative case study methodology that involved two cases (Yin, 2009). This enabled us to examine the context of the phenomena, which Yin (2009) described as "an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and with its real-life context" (p.18).

Data sources included researcher observation field notes, videotaped lessons, and post taping participant interviews. All videotapes were transcribed, and the Israeli research team translated their classroom tapes and interviews into English.

The teachers taught two consecutive lessons in language arts and two in mathematics. Each team (US and Israeli) examined four (4) 45-60-minute videotaped lessons that were completed in each school setting with eight (8) lessons taped in total. The teams met face to face and via Skype® to share transcriptions and preliminary coding categories.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using multiple case study procedures (Yin, 2009) which allowed us to examine large segments of classroom dialogue in context, within and between cases. Further, pattern matching analytical techniques were employed (Yin, 2009) to compare our data to the current theory related to the research-based practices for diverse language learners (e.g. Au, 1993; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Garcia, 1991, Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Because it is difficult to understand language use in short responses, we focused on larger segments of classroom exchanges to evaluate fully the effectiveness of teachers' communicative strategies. This process also permitted us to take into account other means of communication such as, body language, voice inflection, visual representations, and manipulation of materials.

Through this examination, we identified patterns and coded categories that emerged. The dependability of the data were ensured by having the team of researchers independently code a

set of data and then meet to come to consensus on the emerging codes and categories. Comparing these codes and categories led to the discovery of trends and patterns in the data and across the cases. Transcripts were read in their entirety multiple times by each researcher and commonalities were coded and compared across case studies considering both the textual and interpersonal functions of language. Data sources were triangulated, and we examined the videotapes, teacher interviews, and field notes to compare and verify coding. We met in person and via Skype® to compare findings and establish validity by employing member checking techniques.

Findings

Our observations of Denise and Mayasa indicated many commonalities in their use of specific communicative strategies that were consistent with the recommendations for teaching diverse language learners supported by the research. Keeping in mind that neither teacher was trained to work with diverse language learners, we found it interesting that they used many research-based strategies. To further understand how and when they employed these strategies, we identified two major types of communicative strategies used by both teacher participants that we categorized as: Concretization of Content and Situational Language Use (see Table 1). In doing this we wanted to make clear the strategies used so other teachers in similar situations could replicate and reflect on their practice.

Concretization of Content and Situational Language Use

Concretization of Content refers to specific communicative strategies that help make abstract concepts clear through activation of prior knowledge, demonstration, modeling, visual representations, personalization of material, cooperative learning, and explicit vocabulary instruction. *Situational Language Use* refers to specific communicative strategies that

acknowledge the learner's ways of knowing and understanding. S*ituational language* utilizes basic and direct communicative strategies to emphasize a concept and ensure student understanding before the teacher moves on. For example, teachers may employ repetition, elaboration or clarification, intonation, or shorter sentence structures. The teachers easily and seamlessly switched back and forth from concrete to situational strategies as needed.

Initially, we were confounded by the significant amount of situational language employed by the teachers in both their language arts and mathematics lessons that was evident in transcripts and during classroom visits that were documented in field notes. Through analysis, we discovered that use of these strategies were a critical part of the teachers' instructional practice which were in alignment with the research (e.g., Au, 1993; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Interestingly, when asked in post-interviews about their practice they said they simply did what came naturally to them to ensure that their students comprehended the lesson content. We shared the classroom videos and transcriptions with the teachers in post-interviews and they were surprised by the data. Denise stated, "I had no idea I repeated myself so often!" Mayasa, on the other hand, acknowledged that she used many visual techniques to engage her students remarking that she combined visuals with the use of intonation to capture her students' attention.

Commonalities in Communicative Strategies in Language Arts and Mathematics

In response to our second research question regarding the commonalities in primary teachers' communicative strategies used during language arts and mathematics lessons, we found overall that the strategies used were quite similar across content and contexts. Further, both *concrete* and *situational* communicative strategies were used simultaneously by Denise and Mayasa in both their language arts and mathematics lessons as demonstrated in the

classroom discourse. For example, their language arts and mathematics lessons included the use of *concretization of content* by employing the activation of prior knowledge, demonstration, modeling, visualization, personalization, and explicit vocabulary instruction. Cooperative learning followed the lesson. In addition, the lessons utilized *situational language* strategies employing repetition, elaboration, voice modulation, short sentence structure. Consider the following exchange in the beginning of Denise's language arts lesson (day 1):

Denise: Can anyone can tell me…This morning we made

necklaces with beads. This morning we made necklaces with beads.

[Denise gestures with hands apart]

Why did we do that? Why did we do that?

Student: Because it's the hundredth day of school.

Denise: Good. It's the hundredth day of school. What else?

Student: It's Valentine's Day.

Denise: Oh, good. Did we make the necklaces for Valentine's Day?

What did we make the necklaces for?

Student: Because it's the hundredth day of school.

Denise: The hundredth day of school. And how many beads are on the necklace, sir?

Student: One hundred.

Denise: One hundred. Very good. We made them because it's the hundredth day of

school. That is why we made the beads. OK, so what happened?

This morning we made necklaces with beads. That's what happened.

Why did we make necklaces? It's because it is the 100th day of school.

In this segment, Denise began by asking about the projects the students made earlier in the day. They were celebrating two special occasions (Valentine's Day and the 100th day of school). Denise activated prior knowledge about the 100th day of school and had the students see the connection to the necklaces they made with 100 beads. Denise personalized the concept by asking them why they made the necklaces. Denise also used a considerable amount of repetition to focus on the question 'why they made the necklaces' and 'what happened' which led to the introduction of the concept of 'cause and effect.' Denise also spoke in simple sentences, using rising inflection in her voice to focus her question, "Why did we make necklaces?" and then answers her own question for emphasis. In another example, Denise begins her day two language arts lesson by activating students' prior knowledge and reviewing the previous day's lesson. She stands quietly in front of the class holding a balloon in one hand, and a pin in the other (demonstration).

Student: What the balloon for?

Denise: Shh. You asked why do I have a balloon

   [Denise waits until she has the classes attention]

Student: You gonna [sic] pop it.

Denise: Maybe.

Student: Na, na you can't pop the balloon Miss… why you can't pop the balloon

   'cause it hurts my ears.

Denise: Ok, well I'm going to show you what I'm going to do with the balloon.

Denise: I have a balloon and I have a pin. (Denise holds balloon in one hand and

   a pin in the other making motions with pin toward balloon).

Student: Oh, oh, oh you gonna [sic] pop it.

Denise: That's prediction.

Student: No, you can't do this.

Denise: One, two, three, now you're predicting. What I am doing, OK?

Denise: You're predicting.

Denise: Thumbs up if you think I am going to pop it.

In this exchange, Denise used demonstration to activate prior knowledge

pertaining to the concept taught on day one (cause and effect). She used the

visual thumbs up signal to get the students' attention and response. Again, she

used simple sentences as well as a focus on the word 'prediction' to emphasize the

previously learned strategy they were employing. Later she explicitly asked the

students what was the cause and effect of the balloon and pin demonstration

checking if they used the academic terms (cause and effect) correctly. Throughout

the day, Denise used classroom situations to emphasize the concept.

Denise: "Why am I unhappy?

Student: Because we are noisy.

Denise: That's right, and that is cause and effect!"

Denise employs similar communicative strategies during a mathematics lesson:

Denise: Two-digit numbers. So, we are going to be using these tens and ones to create

two-digit numbers. I am going to show you again with the number 64. The

number 64. Which one is going to be our tens? Which one is going to be our

tens?

Student: 6

Denise: Our 6 …are tens. Which one is going to be our ones?

Student: Four

Denise: Four. So, we are going to have six tens and four ones is going to equal the

number 64. OK? Let's see that. Six tens, ready? Ten.

(Denise draws longs on board as children count in unison).

The conceptual learning goal of Denise's day one mathematics lesson was to have the students distinguish between the ones place and the tens place in two-digit numerals and to appreciate the value of the same numeral in the two places. Like the language arts lesson, Denise simultaneously used both concrete and situational language strategies governed by the students' responses.

Mayasa employed similar strategies although she was especially focused on Modern Standard Arabic which is used in written texts and different from Spoken Arabic which students are exposed to in the home and community. The conceptual learning goal of the day one Arabic language arts lesson was to have the students recognize words from text comprehension and learn about inflections in Modern Standard Arabic by using a story. Mayasa began by asking the students the date, day, and the name of the month, the weather and then discussed the concept 'summer.' She activated prior knowledge by drawing a concept map (visual aid) shaped like the sun to associate words with 'summer.' She wrote the word 'summer' in the middle and asked the students to come up to the board and write things that they associated (personalization) with summer (i.e., ice cream, sand, swimming, hot, sea). Mayasa then asked a series of related, short questions intended to help students elaborate on their ideas.

Mayasa: What do you like to do when it's hot?

Mayasa: What do you like to eat in the summer?

Mayasa: Where do you love to eat it?

These questions were also meant to help students prepare for the story reading which Mayasa introduced, "Today we spoke about the sea and the summer. Let's see how it's related to the text presented in front of us." Mayasa modeled how the story is read and uses her head movements to encourage the students to participate in the lesson and later to volunteer to read the text aloud. She also moved around the class to keep students focused on the lesson and used eye contact in order to get their attention. Next, students took turns reading aloud and Mayasa corrected their reading and explained unknown words. This activity gave the students the opportunity to practice their reading in Modern Standard Arabic and learn new words in that language.

Denise and Mayasa repeated statements and questions, essentially using the same language each time:

Denise: And then what happened to the ice cream?

Denise: So what happened to the ice cream?

Student: It melted.

Denise: It melted, and why did it melt?

Student: Because it was sunny outside.

Denise: It was sunny outside, right?

Denise and Mayasa also encourage students' successful responses through elaboration keeping their sentences short and to the point:

Mayasa: How many students are in the first group

Student: 5

Mayasa: How many in the second group?

Student: 7

Mayasa: How many students in sum?

Student: 12

Mayasa: What do we call the new number we got?

Cooperative Learning

Another *concretization of content* communicative strategy used by both Denise and Mayasa was to allow ample time for cooperative small group work after the initial lesson. They often used small groups and/or pairs to discuss academic concepts, and research shows that various group configurations provide students with opportunities to discuss new information in a comfortable setting (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Saravia-Shore, 2008). This cooperative work gave the students an opportunity to socially construct knowledge through discussion and hands-on manipulation of materials (i.e., working on mathematical problems with the unifix cubes; arranging cause and effect picture cards). Students used both their home language and the newly learned academic vocabulary as they explored and practiced a new concept. Both teachers circulated the room at this time, acting as facilitators.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

We know from the research that explicit vocabulary instruction is important for diverse language learners particularly when learning academic vocabulary. In the mathematics lesson (above), we see how Mayasa introduces the mathematical term /sum/ by asking, "How many students in sum? And then checking for understanding of the term she asked, "What do we call the new number we got?"

Denise also emphasized the academic vocabulary needed for her students to understand the mathematics lesson about place value and to understand the value of the same numeral in the two places.

> Denise: Well we are going to use special, special blocks. Now you guys explored with these blocks, but we never used these blocks the way they are supposed to be used in math. I saw you building with these before. We have these special blocks. Does anyone know what kind of blocks these are? Yes.
>
> Student: Building blocks
>
> Denise: OK, maybe they're building blocks.
>
> Student: Ten blocks
>
> Denise: Ten blocks
>
> Student: One blocks
>
> Denise: One blocks
>
> Student: A hundred blocks
>
> Denise: A hundred blocks.
>
> Student: That's big
>
> Denise: So we call these…
>
> Student: Two hundred?
>
> Denise: We are going to call these longs (holds up long unifix cube). Everyone say longs.
>
> Students: Longs
>
> Denise: Longs, and does anyone know how many? We are going to call

these cubes. Everyone say cubes.

Students: Cubes.

Denise: Instead of calling them longs and cubes, we can also call this…I

heard (someone) say it. What did you call this?

Student: A ten block

Denise: A ten block. This is also worth ten, just like our…

Student: Dime

In addition to direct vocabulary instruction, this segment shows that Denise used several communicative strategies including activation of prior knowledge, visualization (unifix cube), repetition, short statements, and elaboration. Denise demonstrated what each cube represented and used the white board to show the connection between the coins and the unifix cubes. She repeated the value of each and when she introduced the cubes, she emphasized their academic vocabulary and had the students repeat the terms in unison. It is important to note that Denise does not move on with the lesson until she is satisfied that the students understand the vocabulary and concept. After modeling how to use the cubes, Denise sends the students back to their seats to work on problems using base ten materials in small groups. Denise repeatedly asked, "How many tens and how many ones. How many longs and how many cubes?" Even as she moved around the room, she repeated these same questions to individual students. The repetition appears to keep the students focused as well as help them understand the concepts and new vocabulary.

Teacher's Intuitive Use of Strategies to Accommodate Diverse Language Learners

A notable finding was that both teachers appeared to rely on their intuition to make unplanned decisions during their lessons. Denise and Mayasa had no formal training as teachers of diverse language learners, yet they understood intuitively that their students required time to practice the language used in school in order to become more proficient. "When obtaining and interpreting student cues and making larger or smaller changes to written or mental plans, the teacher needs intuitions coupled with on-the-spot thinking and decision-making" (Pitkäniemi , 2010, p. 161). Pitkäniemi further explained that interactive thoughts are split-second thoughts and usually tied to the specific context (i.e., the lesson). In addition, both teachers took into account the whole child, their ways of thinking and knowing. These teachers did not adhere to a set pattern of classroom talk. They allowed the students to answer in language they were comfortable with and followed up by modeling the academic language and grammar. Consider this exchange during Mayasa's language arts lesson where she repeats questions twice, then without judgement, repeats the student's response modeling correct sentence structure:

Mayasa: What is the date today?

Student: It is the fifth day of the sixth month.

[The teacher writes on the board.]

Mayasa: What is the name of the month? [repeats the question twice]

Student: kuzyran (June).

Mayasa: The month of kuzyran.

Mayasa: Can someone tell me: the month of June is a month in what season?

> [repeats the question twice]

Student: Summer

Mayasa: The month of June is one of the summer months.

Mayasa: Now tell me where we are? At the beginning of the summer months?

> In the middle of the summer months? At the end of the summer

> months?

Student: At the beginning of the summer season.

Mayasa: We are at the beginning of the summer season.

The teachers were also sensitive to the fact that diverse language learners need more time to answer questions as they process information initially in their first language and then formulate the answers using classroom language. In addition, Denise and Mayasa intuitively understood that their students, who were diverse language learners, often felt lost in class because they could not keep up with the pace. To compensate, Denise and Mayasa modulate their classroom voice and use body language to help their students comprehend the language. All of these strategies take into consideration the various levels of language capacity of the diverse language learner and woven seamlessly into Denise and Mayasa's lessons. Despite the differences in contexts and languages it is important to note that we found overall that Denise and Mayasa applied similar communicative strategies in their classrooms when instructing diverse language learners.

Implications for Teacher Practice

Both Denise and Mayasa used their intuition and ended up using many research-based

strategies to assist diverse language learners in achieving success. Relying on intuition, however, is not a viable model for helping teachers improve their instruction with diverse language learners. Teachers need a "language-informed perspective" (Harper & de Jong, 2004) when teaching diverse language learners that will enable them to plan for and employ a variety of differentiated strategies in order to help diverse language learners achieve success. School and district administrators need to provide professional development to teachers that will help them make informed decisions about the needs of diverse language learners and support teachers in realizing the potential of inclusive classrooms.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

With a growing population worldwide of diverse language learners in our classrooms, it is imperative that we provide all teachers with appropriate preparation to work with linguistically diverse learners. We have learned from our research of Denise and Mayasa that it takes a combination of communicative strategies to ensure that diverse language learners are engaged in classroom learning. Pre-service teachers must: a) understand how language learning works, b) know what strategies exist to help diverse language learners, c) have time to practice these strategies in authentic settings with diverse language learners and experienced teachers, and d) reflect on the success of their strategy use with diverse language learners. It is up to teacher preparation programs to provide pre-service teachers with this knowledge and these experiences to ensure the success of all learners.

Further Research

The limited scope of this research (two case studies) obviously curtails generalizability, but it is important for this research to continue in other contexts as we believe the findings

suggest the importance of effective communicative strategies to the learning outcomes for diverse language learners. With the high demand on students' language skills to demonstrate proficiency, especially in language arts and mathematics, it is incumbent upon us to discover ways to help diverse language learners be successful, especially if instruction is in a language other than students' home language.

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Table 1. Communicative Strategies used by the teacher participants

Concretization of Content	Communicative Strategy	Definition
	Activation of prior knowledge	Teacher prompts students to create a dialog about what is known
	Demonstration	Display or illustrate example of the concept
	Modeling	To show how a process is employed
	Visual representation	Use of visual aids to clarify concept including pictures, images, gestures, and body language
	Personalization	Use student background knowledge to make personal connections to concepts
	Cooperative learning, small group work to increase dialog	Employ the use of cooperative learning groups to increase student discussion of concepts/content.
	Explicit vocabulary instruction	Focus and instruction of required academic terms
Situational Language Use		
	Repetition	Teacher repeats word or phrase verbatim
	Elaboration/clarification	To extend or embellish student response
	Intonation	Modulation of voice
	Short sentence structure	Use of brief, simple sentences