Effective Teaching Practices for Non-Native English Speaking Students

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Abstract

This research paper will discuss effective teaching methods teachers should use to instruct Non-native English speaking students. It will cover some of the issues these students face and the best forms of instruction, and how they may be implemented in the classroom.

*Keywords*: Non-Native English speaking students, Education, Best practices.
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Equitable Teaching Practices for Non-Native English Speaking Students

Being able to speak more than one language is an amazing advantage, simply put, because it allows one to be able to communicate with more people in the world. However, it is apparent that in the United States’ education system, education is catered toward entirely English fluent students. Growing up in California, it is evident that English is not the only language present in people’s daily lives. One-third of all non-native English-speaking students live in California, and 76 percent of them are Spanish-dominant (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016, p.163). It is vital for the development and success of these non-native English-speaking students that teachers are fully equipped to educate and provide them with a tailored learning experience. A person who speaks English poorly earns roughly 33% less than one who speaks English well (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016, p. 162). Bilingual students compete with native English speakers once they enter the workforce; however, they must have equal access and education opportunities. This paper sought to find the best practices that ensure an equitable and accessible education for non-native English-speaking students.

Statement of Problem

There is a long history of the lack of recognition and support for non-native English-speaking (NNES) students in the United States. Even the term most often used to describe non-native English-speaking students, English Language Learners (ELL), is outdated and promotes an English-only narrative to students without acknowledging their cultural differences (Linse, 2013, p.110). Currently, the fastest-growing student population in U.S. schools today are children of immigrants, half of whom do not speak English fluently and are thus labeled English Learners (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011). These students often lack the proper educational resources that they desperately need. “Immigrant English learners are
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typically tracked into ELL classes that focus almost exclusively on acquiring English, often to
the exclusion of academic content” (Callahan, 2005; Callahan et al., 2009). NNES students are
not given the same access to quality education as native English-speaking students. It is vital for
the success of non-native English-speaking students that they have access to the proper resources
they need. The lack of support for NNES students is often reflected in their performance in
school. “Research suggests that immigrant English learners score lower on standardized tests,
graduate from high school at lower rates and drop out at higher rates than their native
English-speaking peers” (Lee, 2012, p. 66). For these students to succeed in the real world and
school, teachers must be aware and prepared on how to teach them.

Justification of the Study

Like any other teaching philosophy, teachers should constantly be questioning how they
can improve themselves for the benefit of their students. Despite the large population of
non-native English-speaking students encountered in our schools, we do not see many resources
or content standards catered explicitly to these students. Part of the purpose of my research was
to find the best practices and educate myself on the best methods for teaching NNES students.
Non-native English-speaking students are almost always integrated into classrooms where the
students and teachers are fully fluent in English. Therefore, teachers need to be capable of
instructing and providing proper support to these students to ensure their future success.

Positionality

As a future teacher, I want to make sure that I can provide all of my students with the best
education possible. Growing up, I was surrounded by lots of teachers, and I would always hear
about how they had students in their classroom who did not speak English and how they wished
that they could help them. So, I decided to minor in Spanish so that I, as a future educator, could
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be better equipped to help, even if only some, of my prospective students. I want all of my future students to feel as though my classroom is a safe space for them to be themselves and to foster a love for learning. Through my research, I was able to find the best methods for teaching NNES students and the proper strategies for implementing them in my future classroom.

Review of The Literature

Challenges Non-Native English Speakers Face

Despite the ongoing fight for reform, non-native English-speaking students still face many disparities within the education system. Many teachers are not well trained enough to instruct non-native English-speaking students. Institutional preparedness is key to student success within the NNES community. On the occasion when teachers do provide accommodations, such as aids or extra resources, for NNES students, sometimes they are not specific enough. For example, “Most of the accommodations provided for ELL students were designed for students with disabilities and such practices may not be relevant to the needs of ELLs” (Calderón et al., 2011). Teachers must make instruction personalized and specific for each non-native English-speaking student. All NNES students come from a plethora of backgrounds and have vastly different experiences, so teachers must get to know each student and where their needs lie.

Teachers must also remember that they should provide a safe space for students to make mistakes in the classroom. Another challenge non-native English-speaking students face includes language anxiety when using their new language, “Early acquisition (of a language) can be hindered in settings where the language user is frequently corrected or reprimanded for incorrect speech; it is enhanced by adults’ eager attention to and acceptance of the child’s language use.
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Acquisition occurs most effectively when there is a need to know, the chance to try, and the freedom to err without penalty” (Nessel & Dixon, 2008; Gary, 1978). Teachers need to allow students to make mistakes and learn independently rather than forcing English on them. English language acquisition can be daunting as a child, and teachers should be reminded that language acquisition does not happen immediately. During a study in which 158 Taiwanese-Americans were asked about their classroom anxiety surrounding learning a new language, the researchers found: “Teacher academic support was negatively correlated with speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as well as fear of failing the class, and positively correlated with student comfort with English-language learning” (Huang & et al., 2010, p. 35). This statement concludes that teacher support is essential to eliminating speech anxiety and allowing students a safe space to practice. For non-native English-speaking students to succeed in the classroom, teachers need to help students ease their speech anxiety. Easing non-native language speaking anxiety creates a more productive and safe classroom environment.

**Utilizing Prior Knowledge**

Another common theme in researching equitable practices for non-native English-speaking students was how utilizing the student’s prior knowledge of the student's native language can aid student development. Often, teachers view non-native English-speaking students as being insufficient; in particular, this is seen with students not being proficient in English. Teachers will pressure students who are not yet fluent in English to pick up English quickly. However, these students should be highlighted for their differences rather than be made to feel as though they are insufficient. A strategy that I found was that using connections from the native language to the new language aids students greatly in picking up English. The transfer theory states that the more similar two languages are, the easier they learn (Barrow &
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Markman-Pithers, 2016). Many cognates (or similar sounding and spelling words found in both languages) exist, for example, in English and Spanish. Utilizing cognates is proven to help students learn new languages (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). When talking about research done in language transfer, Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) state, “Although certain skills may transfer, such a transfer isn't automatic; for transfer to occur, they argue, students need instruction in areas such as identifying common cognates. In addition, the transfer theory relies heavily on children having a strong foundation in their native language” (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, p. 166). Having a solid foundation in the native language is vital for NNES students to expand their prior and new knowledge. Using resources relevant to the non-native English-speaking student's past experiences can significantly aid them in learning. According to Nessel and Dixon (2008), “In general, the reading process is mastered most easily when beginners read texts that are relevant to their lives, when the words of the texts are in their listening and speaking vocabularies when the grammatical structures of the texts are similar to those they use orally, when they are learning in a supportive environment, and when they have many opportunities to practice with reading materials of their own choosing” (p. 37). Providing non-native English-speaking students with literature practice that they can relate to allows them to grow in their native language and English. When they can relate to what they are reading and draw connections, they can have a better learning experience.

**Group Work**

Working in groups is another fantastic way non-native English-Speaking students can have a more effective learning experience. According to Alghamdi (2018), who conducted a study featuring 11 non-native English-speaking students from an advanced English Second Language reading class, it was found that: “Group work was the most favorable learning activity
among the others. 90% of the students approved that they learn new words from working in
groups to accomplish a given task. Group work allows students to share their knowledge and
feed off of their group mates in a smaller, less intimidating environment rather than in front of
the whole class” (p.3). During this study, it was found that Group work can also increase
students’ new vocabulary acquisition skills. “The results showed that students learn vocabulary
mostly from reading classes and through group work. Therefore, ESL teachers are strongly
encouraged to investigate their students’ favorite learning method to optimize the vocabulary
learning experience” (Alghamdi, 2018, p. 82). The study results emphasized that students are
more interested and motivated through group work activities and learn more vocabulary from
working in groups. Group work makes it so non-native English-speaking students can learn from
other students. It also provides a safe environment for students to practice their new language
and is overall a beneficial experience.

Concerning group work, Nessel and Dixon (2008) stated, “...small group activities
introduce vocabulary and common language structures with an emphasis on expressions that are
directly related to the people, objects, and events the students encounter in school and at home
and that are most interesting and engaging to them (p.21).” Working with groups while engaging
with the surrounding environment is a way for students to engage actively and create connections
with their surroundings to better retain the information they learn.

Assessments

My research found that assessments are a great way to understand the exact level of
learning your non-native English-speaking students. Most teachers, however, usually focus on
high-stakes tests that do not reflect the knowledge of their students. However, utilizing
questionnaires proved to be a more successful method. According to Alghamdi (2018),
“Teachers can create formative assessments (e.g., a questionnaire or one-on-one interviews) to inquire about the students’ language learning behavior. Making use of the information provided in this study, teachers should be able to develop effective vocabulary classes. It also can be helpful for the teachers to plan the class activities accordingly” (p.81). Assessments for students that act as questionnaires can significantly help teachers understand students' levels and therefore plan their lessons accordingly. Another study found that:

“Language-learning anxiety is an established concept in second-language learning and can be assessed by questionnaires. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS), which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), has been extensively used to measure the extent of students’ anxiety levels during language classes. The FLCAS contains 33 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with an option of neutral. The FLCAS was designed to investigate students’ language anxiety concerning communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1991; Zheng, Y. et al. 2018).”

These types of tests can significantly aid teachers in helping their students overcome language anxiety and figure out what teaching styles best suit them.

**Methodology**

This section includes the theoretical framework and a community partner interview that I have found helpful in my research in understanding the best teaching practices for NNES students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework article that I chose is about Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. As stated in the
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article, critical race theory can be defined as "... the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination" (Solorzano, D, et al., 2000). The critical race theory goes to combat any traditional unjust beliefs that are present in the schooling system. I wanted to learn more about how microaggressions and racism can factor into the learning capabilities of non-native English-speaking students. This article talks explicitly about the struggles of Chicanas and Chicanos in doctoral education. Although my research focuses more specifically on elementary school students, it is interesting to see how these microaggressions and racist actions can shape the way students behave in the future. Upon doing more research, I found that critical race theory has been present for more than 40 years in the United States. The critical researcher that developed this theory was Derrick Bell, who spent many years seeing what it would mean to understand racism as a permanent characteristic in America. Understanding Critical race theory is to understand equitable practices for people across all races and backgrounds. Understanding critical race theory is vital to understanding where future students are coming from and understanding their feelings and thoughts. This will help me address my problem of practice since when dealing with non-native English-speaking students, some teachers may subconsciously treat them differently. Therefore, it is essential to understand their backgrounds and treat them equitably with respect for them to have a beneficial learning experience.

Community Partner Interview

To further my understanding of my problem of practice, I decided to interview a community partner. I interviewed a second-grade teacher, Mrs. A, in the Bay Area, California, who has lots of experience working with NNES students and is bilingual. This individual helped
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me gain first-hand knowledge of my problem of practice and what solutions look like in action. This interview helped me understand my problem of practice by gaining insight that can only be found through teaching NNES students.

Since I have no experience working with NNES students, I wanted to see if the research aligned with real-world practices. Therefore, I began the interview by asking general questions. By the end of the interview, it was evident that my research aligned with what Mrs. A had to say.

When asked about the general quality of NNES instruction, she stated that the language barrier could sometimes prove to be complicated. She notices that across her school, not all teachers can effectively communicate with the parents of students due to the language barrier. This was something that I had found in my research but was not very consistent throughout all sources. However, NNES students need extra support in the classroom, and having parents on board with their development can aid them with their progress in the classroom. Having an open line of communication is critical. Tools like google translate, while helpful, can sometimes confuse the message and still allow for things to get lost in translation. A solution Mrs. A recommended was to seek the help of an individual at the school who is fluent in the language and can help to overcome the communication barrier.

We talked extensively about the importance of not making NNES students feel outcasted or different for their bilingual abilities. So often, NNES students are pushed to grow proficient in English, and their other strengths are neglected. Mrs. A states that allowing students to speak in their native language can enable them to grow in both their native language and English. She stated that it helps students connect the English words to words in their native language. She also said that a solution could be to label things in the classroom in both the native language and English- such as the clocks, bulletin boards, the whiteboard, etc. As I have learned from my
research, using students' prior knowledge can significantly aid them in apprehending a new language and maximizing their learning. Mrs. A stated many possible solutions to help NNES students speak and write English. She says that writing is one of the most challenging parts of the school for her NNES Spanish-dominant students. She noted visual indicators such as paragraph frames, graphic organizers, and signal words with hand gestures. Visual aids can help students create the connection between something abstract and something tangible. She also mentioned the use of sight words, vocabulary charts, and comparative input charts as potential valuable strategies to help NNES students gain understanding.

Overall, this interview allowed me to gain first-hand perspectives on ideas and solutions for my research. The amount of new information learned allowed me to realize that my research was aligned with what Mrs. A had to say. This interview allowed me to expand on my previous knowledge of NNES students and learn new strategies to steer towards equitable teaching practices for NNES students.

**Findings and Discussion**

This section will discuss my findings from my research and how they align with my theoretical framework and community partner interview.

**Discussion of Findings**

Through my community partner interview and my research, I have noticed that when teaching non-native English-speaking students, one of the most important things is making them feel comfortable and at home in the classroom. It is just a fact that most teachers will not be able to speak every language they encounter in their professional careers. The very least we can do as teachers is not to make these students feel outcasted or that their inability to speak English fluently hinders their overall learning potential and intelligence.
It was also found that while assessments are important to seeing students' levels, they are not the most crucial thing when evaluating non-native English-speaking students’ growth or progress. It is essential not to stress out your students when assessing them.

I also found in conducting my research that having as many resources as possible available to your NNES students is what will significantly help them to grow and continue their learning in the classroom.

Activating prior knowledge and schema seemed to be the most critical aspect of my research and the interview regarding teaching NNES students. It is constructive to connect their prior knowledge and language to the new material. We want our students to be proficient in both languages, and connecting the two can allow for more learning and easier acquisition of new knowledge.

Teachers also must not push their students towards an English-only narrative of their education. In the United States, we can see an emphasis on fully English-speaking students and seeing being a non-native English speaking student as a weakness. Instead, teachers should highlight these differences and help students grow in as many languages as possible while recognizing their cultural differences. Teachers should be actively anti-racist and put aside any personal prejudices towards students with different backgrounds and celebrate our differences so that these students can have an equitable learning experience.

**Conclusion**

Many teachers are not prepared for non-native English-speaking students and are never educated on how to teach them. In this study, I sought to find the best practices for teaching NNES students and how teachers can be better equipped to instruct them. Firstly, I researched the most common issues that NNES students face. By understanding their struggles, I uncovered...
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the most vital areas for creating a valuable learning space for them. The findings from my research showed that non-native English-speaking students have a better learning experience when utilizing their prior knowledge of their native language, working in small groups, and assessing their prior knowledge. My community partner interview shed light on how your students should feel comfortable and not intimidated by the classroom. The community partner interview emphasized that while all of the things I had learned in my research were crucial for student learning, first and foremost, the focus should be on providing students with love and the bolstering that they may need. From researching the critical race theory, I have found that it is vital to be actively anti-racist and make your classroom a home and a safe space for all students. I learned that learning takes place best when students are free to be themselves fully. This study is critical because teacher preparedness and awareness are essential with an ever-growing population of non-native English-speaking students. Teachers must know how they can best teach and serve their students regardless of their various backgrounds.

Implications and Recommendations

The following steps toward more effective teaching practices for NNES students would be creating and providing resources for teachers on how to educate non-native english students properly. This way, all teachers would be better prepared for when they inevitably encounter NNES students and know how to instruct them best. I think it would also be beneficial for every school in the nation to have a language specialist specially prepared for NNES students and meet with them individually to check their progress and provide them with further support. These suggestions are only a couple of methods that could benefit NNES students. These practices will provide NNES students with an overall more effective and equitable experience.
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Appendices

Community Partner Questions

1. What challenges do you face when having NNES students in the classroom?
2. What resources are available to NNES students at your school?
3. What resources do you specifically provide to NNES students?
4. How often do you encounter NNES students?
5. What are the benefits of having NNES students in your classroom?
6. Do assessments work for NNES students?
7. Does group work help NNES students?
8. Does utilization of the native language help NNES students?
9. How can teachers better provide support for NNES students?
10. What in the future could aid NNES students?