Due to the influx of immigrants into the country, the United States has witnessed a rapid and constant growth in public school enrollment of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations during the past decade, who are called English Language Learners (ELL). ELL students who speak an ethnic language other than English, the mainstream societal language, constitute the fastest growing subgroup of students among the public school population, whose number increases by nearly 10% each year (Kindler, 2002; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D’Emilio, 2005). At present, at least one in five children aged from 5 to 17 in the U.S. has a foreign-born parent (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2005), and not all, but most of these children acquire English as their second language. Particularly due to the persistent gap in underachievement rates between ELLs and majority students (Fry, 2008; LeClair, 2009), the education of ELLs has become one of the most crucial matters and rising challenges in US education system which requires more attention and action in both theoretical and practical arenas.

Having realized the dire issues concerning the education of ELLs in the US and the immediate and heavy need for highly-qualified educators, Sharon Adelman Reyes and Trina Lynn Vallone wrote a book with the contribution of Barbara Nykiel-Herbert which constitutes a collection of practical instructional strategies along with the discussion of the theoretical bases underlying them. Their book, entitled as Constructivist Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners, aims to assist all the teachers working with ELLs (not exclusively ESOL and bilingual specialists) to enrich their repertoire of necessary classroom techniques and activities. It is comprised of a preface, nine chapters, an appendix and a glossary.

After discussing issues of educational equity and democracy in the education of ELLs in the preface, Reyes and Vallone provide an overview of the perspectives in second language acquisition and learning in chapter 1. Referring to current research and real classroom examples, they briefly explore the process of second language acquisition in relation to cognitive development, academic content and culture. They basically demonstrate how crucial the role of the native language and culture to the development of proficiency in the second language and explicate why bilingual education...
has numerous benefits for the ELL students in the US.

Chapter 2 describes all the models of educational programs which have been engineered and exploited thus far for the purpose of addressing the changing classroom dynamics with the mounting number of ELLs enrolling in US schools. Prior to beginning the delineation of the models, the authors draw attention to the fact that some models are more conducive to constructivist teaching practices than the others. In this chapter, what the readers can find particularly helpful is the table which groups the models into the categories of subtractive and additive and the figure which places all the models in a cultural and linguistic sensitivity continuum.

In the subsequent chapter, the authors commence with the juxtaposition of a constructivist teacher with a didactic teacher to illustrate the constructivist perspective in action. They provide the observation of one class presented by each teacher to highlight the distinction between the two. Furthermore, this chapter explores the cognitive and social perspectives in constructivism and indicates how instrumental they could be for the better education of ELLs. It ends with the discussion of four guiding principles for constructivist classrooms.

Chapter 4 principally presents the implementation of constructivist perspectives in the instructional environments prepared for ELLs. Being one of the most practice-oriented chapters in the book, it suggests a wide array of classroom strategies and learning activities emphasizing constructivist pedagogy such as reading aloud, wordless books, creative movement, and literature circles. Although these strategies are particularly devised to be used while working with the ELLs in the language arts classes, the authors note that they can be modified for use in other content areas, as well. Moreover, the authors describe some more classroom activities which can be utilized in specific content area classes. In this chapter, they also discuss how assessment is conceptualized and performed in constructivist practice. After directing attention to the significant challenges that are posed for ELLs by formal, norm-referenced standardized tests, they center their discussion on classroom assessment. The chapter concludes with the summary of suggested practices for constructivist second language classrooms.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the critical pedagogy illustrated through examples from real classroom environments. It is followed by the discussion of the four guiding principles to which teachers serving ELLs should adhere in order to prepare instructional environments promoting and fostering critical pedagogy. The chapter closes with a short discussion of identity formation in critical classrooms in which they accentuate the premise that “critical classrooms are places where teachers and students renegotiate their identities during the process of classroom discussion” (p. 79).

Chapters 6 and 7 (both named as Constructivist Classroom Connections) explore the application of constructivist practice in actual teaching through transcripts (along with students’ narratives and written work) which were recorded on site from two different programs in the United States. The authors embed explanation boxes in the transcripts so as to indicate how the instructional practices in these programs are undergirded by constructivist pedagogy. Through these boxes, they build the bridge between theoretical underpinnings explicated in the previous chapters and teachers’ instructional moves in the authentic learning environment. At the end of each chapter, they provide a “guidelines for practice” section which summarizes the points discussed in the explanation boxes. Being very similar to the previous two chapters in terms of format, chapter 8 demonstrates the application of critical pedagogy in the classroom through transcripts, but it has concluding remarks instead of a guidelines section.
In the last chapter, the authors present a conclusion referring to their observations in the three programs they researched. They recommend an instructional practice for ELLs which “is constructivist and critical, integrates language, content, process and uses modifications to make the curriculum more accessible, and encourages identity construction and fosters positive self-esteem through validation of native language and culture” (p. 170). They call this practice Critical Constructivist Education for ELLs.

Reyes and Vallone’s book has two particular strengths. First, throughout the book, they considerably draw upon their research-based experiences with the teachers serving ELLs in their culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Because they had opportunities, in the scope of their research, to observe how constructivist strategies can be implemented, they were able to provide substantial examples for the constructivist strategies they suggest. Moreover, thanks to their extensive research, they bring in the experiences and voices of teachers from different content areas who work with ELLs, which is in line with their contention that all teachers (not solely ESOL and bilingual specialists) are supposed to be equipped with the necessary skills to teach ELLs. Second, along with the explanation of constructivism and critical theory and the description of the suggested classroom activities, the authors illustrate these activities with the help of authentic scenes from the classrooms. Especially, the incorporation of the observation transcripts from three programs (which are oriented by constructivist critical educational premises) in chapters 6, 7 and 8 makes a tremendous contribution to the practical side of the book.

The book can prove useful for mainstream and bilingual teachers, ESOL specialists, and teacher leaders in U.S. schools. Due to the current trend in English language learning which zeroes in on the academic content placing the linguistic aspects in the background, not only ESOL and bilingual educators but also content area teachers will need the instructional activities in this book and could find them greatly beneficial for their development as ELL educators. The book in its entirety or some of its chapters can be used by prospective teachers in teacher education courses at undergraduate or graduate levels and by practicing educators in professional development sessions.

Regarding the organization of the chapters in Reyes and Vallone’s work, although the real classroom examples are presented in the three consecutive chapters towards the end of the book, the opening chapters frequently refer to these classrooms so as to better illustrate the issues discussed. Therefore, the readers may want to peruse the transcripts in these three chapters which would facilitate their grasp of the ideas in the initial ones.

References
Book Review of Constructivist Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners


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