

Nicholas Merrill - ESL Reflection: Observations and Teaching at Jackson Middle School

Jackson Middle School provided a unique opportunity to work with ELL students in a science classroom. I had very little experience with or understanding of these type of learners prior to this semester. Watching and working with these students has provided insight into the difficulties ELL students have learning in a science classroom in addition to underlining challenges that almost all students face when approaching new material in the sciences.

In my observations one classroom included higher WIDA level ELLs alongside their English speaking peers in a general science classroom. One of the difficulties I observed was how to group the students at tables within the classroom and during group activities. The ELLs seemed more comfortable working together. The more homogeneous groups also used the teacher's attention more effectively because she could address problems at the group, rather than individual level. However, ELLs in heterogeneous groupings seemed to benefit from working with their standard learning peers, but the students at those tables seemed apprehensive to do so. I imagined there was a discomfort with speaking English, which may have caused the hesitation in answering questions and working with mixed groupings. The teacher however provided opportunities for students to write their answers on whiteboards to hold up. I thought this was an excellent strategy, which provided an additional opportunity to work with the language inside of the context of a science class. By implementing many of these "simple" techniques the teacher addressed some of the needs of the ELLs without alienating other students in the class.

I was excited to try my hand at some of the strategies I observed in working with the ELL students in the afterschool program alongside other student teachers. Unfortunately administrative difficulties forced us to trim our lesson. In addition, scheduling conflicts forced our cohort to split so that the ESL student teacher was not with us the day of our lesson.

However, with these hiccups aside, I still took a lot away from the experience. I realized how many little assumptions I took for granted when explaining something. For example I had to explain the word “freezing.” Not just the scientific or technical definition of the word, but the actual colloquial use of word. The experience helped me realize that learning a new definition for a word in the context of a science class, for example “force” or “power,” is like learning a new word to an English speaker and is even farther away to an ELL.

I also saw firsthand how the label ELL can be misleading. Though WIDA levels help divide students along a spectrum of ability, I still felt in my observation there was a definite division and perhaps dichotomy between ELL and non-ELLs. However, working while working with students I saw how different an ELL student can be from another. While one student struggled to understand the word “freezing” another was able to accurately define and use the word “adhesion.” Some had difficulties answering questions, but were able to instruct others when it came to the evaluation. I hope that working with these ELL students of diverse ability levels will allow me to recognize and address the differences in abilities and skills amongst all students.