

Foreword

Finding Cats and Dogs in the Zoo

Ofelia García

The first vignette in Swinney and Velasco’s masterful *Integrating Content and Language Goals for English Learners and Struggling Students, Grades 2–6*, introduces us to a second grader who is learning English. When the teacher asks the class what animals they want to see in the zoo, the girl uses the words she knows in English to reply: “Cats and dogs.” The teacher ignores her response and moves on to other children. Swinney and Velasco point out that the teacher’s dismissal of this girl’s class participation misses an important point. The child herself, upon returning from the zoo, is able to correctly articulate that there were no cats and dogs. Indeed, there would have been a way for the teacher to find the girl’s “cats and dogs” in initially talking about the zoo. This is precisely what Swinney and Velasco guide teachers to do through this book.

The question of how to teach students who are learning English, those who may be more aptly called “emergent bilinguals” (García & Kleifgen, 2010), has become a minefield, with scholars arguing for more or less use of students’ home languages in the classroom, and with bilingual education under attack. Swinney and Velasco avoid the minefields by focusing on only one thing—the teacher’s expertise in developing the academic language of emergent bilinguals, whether in bilingual, ESL, or mainstream classrooms. In fact, all of the examples come from different classroom contexts. The focus is then on the careful and intentional planning to use and practice academic language. To find the cats and dogs in the conversation about the zoo, the teacher has to be vigilant and to change her lenses so as to develop a new vision of possibilities.

Swinney and Velasco’s book precisely offers a new close-up vision of how to teach emergent bilinguals. Whereas most texts focus on macro-organizational classroom features that sometimes blur the vision, Swinney and Velasco’s approach is telescopic, bringing into focus the micro-elements that teachers of emergent bilingual students must manage. The book carefully and intentionally scaffolds for teachers what they must plan and do in order to develop not only new planning and teaching strategies, but also a new close-up vision.

In the many years that I have worked in this field, I have not found another book that offers such minute and careful details focused on the development of academic language for emergent bilinguals. The issue of which language to use, whether English or the home language, doesn’t enter the picture. It is taken for granted that the context will determine the language use—whether English or the child’s home language. What is important in language use is not the language per se, but the *type* of language that children use. Thus, over and over again, the authors repeat that academic language has to be planned. And yet, the authors make

it clear that the starting point of academic language development lies elsewhere. Teaching and learning emergent bilinguals start with the children's background knowledge, their own cats and dogs, and with social language and conversation.

The academic language of emergent bilinguals, the book tells us, is developed through three building blocks: (a) background knowledge, (b) a curriculum of talk that includes critical thinking skills, and (c) the components of read alouds and shared reading and writing. It is precisely these three building blocks that are weaved throughout the book. In the first part, they constitute the first three chapters, with each building block developed in detail. In the second part of the book, each of the three building blocks is manifested in disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning units (language arts, social studies, science, interdisciplinary unit) enacted by teachers of different age groups and in bilingual or ESL classrooms. It is as if the telescope that Swinney and Velasco offer teachers is collapsible, not only offering a different vision, but also enabled by an instrument whose shape is consistent and whose parts neatly fit into each other. Thus, although the vision is up-close, it is also integrated, whole, and expansive.

What makes this book unlike any other is the careful build-up of exact strategies. The authors anchor their examples not only in real classrooms with real teachers and children, but also in authentic instructional strategies. For example, the chapters in Part II all offer a template for planning the unit, but in addition, the authors include and describe exact tools to be used. Each of the chapters in this part has a section called "Breaking the Plan Into Doable Parts," and specific tools are identified and modeled for each of the components. Graphic organizers, conception definition maps, partnership strategies, semantic webbing, word walls, and photo analysis work sheets are all part of the toolboxes provided. This is especially evident in Part I of the book. In Chapter 1, specific strategies for teaching vocabulary, as well as syntax and morphology, are carefully detailed. In Chapter 2, examples of strategies to develop listening, as well as oral abilities, are carefully described. And Chapter 3 provides not only detailed examples of structures of balanced literacy, but even the exact words that teachers need to use before, during, and after read alouds and shared reading and writing. The result is that more than a map or guide is offered in this book. Instead, minute details that would be helpful for any teacher, but especially for those teaching children who need to develop academic language, are presented throughout the book.

At a time in which the nation's children are increasingly bilingual, this book offers the support that all teachers need to develop the academic language of emergent bilinguals. Swinney and Velasco make the very important point that the curriculum for these students needs to be the same challenging one as that offered other students. The book instead focuses on amplifying the teaching strategies and modifying the instructional strategies so as to recognize the emergent bilinguals' "cats and dogs," and then build upon them. Swinney and Velasco offer teachers of emergent bilinguals ways of seeing emergent bilingual children with new lenses and hearing their words with new tools. Only then, by listening closely to their conversations and their thinking, will teachers be able to adjust their vision of these children as most capable learners, and thus plan appropriately for the development of their academic language. Cats and dogs can indeed be found in conversations about the zoo in classrooms, and Swinney and Velasco give teachers ways of leading emergent bilinguals to also find the lions, and tigers, and bears that they're sure to find if they're allowed to walk on the same challenging curricular road as all the other children.

REFERENCE

- García, O., & Kleifgen, J. (2010). *Educating emergent bilinguals. Policies, programs and practices for English language learners*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.