Examining Our Assumptions in Delivering Instruction

We have all had the frustrating experience of assuming that our teaching was clear and straightforward, only to discover that our students did not fully comprehend what we were trying to convey. This Bulletin discusses underlying principles in planning for and delivering instruction - principles which ultimately serve to clarify our efforts at comprehensible delivery. Applicable to all students, these principles are particularly relevant to language minority learners who "push the envelope" in requiring all of us to deliver comprehensible instruction.

PRINCIPLES
# 1: KNOW YOUR STUDENTS
The more we know our students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, specific home environments, and formative experiences, the more perceptive we will be in anticipating content to teach and how to deliver it. For example, knowing whether or not our students have certain experiences will be a guide for deciding whether and how to provide background knowledge and to whom before delivering instruction.

#2: BE EXPLICIT
We need to make sure our students know why and how they are learning content (metacognition) and using language (metalinguistics). This means that we need to communicate orally and in writing why we are teaching what we are teaching. Nothing should be left to chance. For example, content should be connected to an overall framework or a broad question and put in writing so that it is clearly seen. Similarly, appropriate transition or vocabulary words should be discussed and made available for students to use when performing tasks and activities.

#3 CHECK FREQUENTLY FOR COMPREHENSION
Comprehension needs to be monitored frequently and never assumed. Engaging students in tasks and activities that demonstrate learning is the most appropriate
way to monitor comprehension. It needs, however, to be supplemented by organized individual conferencing, in which questions are directly posed and students are allowed the opportunity to articulate their knowledge.

#4: REQUIRE TALK AND WRITING

Learning needs to be accompanied by thoughtful processing through use of all language skills. Talking and writing, in particular, are productive ways to process learning. Talking and writing about content is an absolute must, with appropriate accompanying graphic frameworks to help students use language in increasingly sophisticated ways.

#5: ALWAYS READ TO YOUR STUDENTS

In all content areas and in all grades, teachers should read to their students. Most importantly, reading to students models language structure which might otherwise be inaccessible because of limited reading ability. With a little library or internet research, a great deal of relevant material can be found to supplement and enhance topics being studied.

#6: TALK ABOUT LANGUAGE

Students need to be made aware of features of language and how they impact understanding. This means that teachers must anticipate specific words and phrases which are crucial for comprehending concepts.

#7: EMPHASIZE VOCABULARY

Crucial to language growth is the associated growth in specific words which are used to define, clarify, and explain concepts. Vocabulary is the "fuel" of language, whereby students can grow conceptually and linguistically. Teachers must plan and coordinate word use in their content area(s) as an integral part of instruction.

#8: REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A COMMUNICATOR

English is the means of communication through which we deliver instruction. It is vital to comprehensible delivery of instruction to pay attention to how we use English to accomplish tasks and activities and to explain, transition, and assess content.

PRACTICAL CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

1. Take the time to interact non-academically with students. Appropriate collaborative interactions help to empower students through the development of personal relationships. This can be of enormous benefit for motivating students.
2. Give directions and transitions with clear use of specific words, accompanied (where appropriate) by written instructions and directions. This will help to embed understanding of what and how procedures are to be accomplished and what needs to be learned.
3. In addition to planning tasks and activities applicable to content, organize a systematic individual conferencing plan to learn how each student is comprehending content. Use post-its for quick and easy note-taking.
4. Require talking and writing about everything you teach. Use these opportunities for expanding language use and increasing vocabulary.
5. Read to your students at least once or twice per week.
6. Anticipate problematic language features and point them out to your students.
7. Plan a core vocabulary list and provide this list to your students at the beginning of the school year. Refer to it periodically.
8. Always monitor how you use language!