

Bridges into Diversity: An English Language Immersion Program

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Understanding comes from that which is within.

No two people perceive any happening identically. (Authors)

Public schools are becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. In the U.S., the percentages of Americans who are Asian, African American, and Hispanic are increasing rapidly. Simultaneously, there has also been a tremendous increase in the number of language minority students that U.S. schools serve. Approximately one of every three Americans comes from another culture or non-English speaking home. The minority school age population is predicted to increase from 25 percent in 1980 to 42 percent before the turn of the century (Commission of Minority Participation in Educational and American Life, 1988). In many large urban centers, 80-90 percent of the school age population will be non-white (Astin, 1982; Gonzalez, 1990). These culturally distinct students perceive multiple realities based upon their various backgrounds of experience. So with the changing demographics, a shift is occurring. Instead of bringing people into a corporate identity as Americans, our culture is searching for ways to educate these children without the loss of their cultural roots. Public school programs are seeking to connect students with their roots while they are enhancing their abilities so the next generation of Americans will experience acceptance and dignity through its diversity.

A research study of ethnicity in middle-school-based readers used in U.S. schools (Campbell, 1993) found that some cultures of the students are still not currently represented in the materials used for reading instruction. Asian and Pacific Islanders were seldom found in the three basal series despite the groups having more than doubled from 3.5 million to 7.3 million, according to the 1990 U.S. census. The representation of African American characters in this study was found to be similar to that of studies conducted a decade ago. Only 1.8 percent of the characters in the readers were Hispanic.

Truly, the schools face a challenge. Public school speech clinicians and reading specialists must develop programs to meet the needs of these students, without taking from them their ethnic heritage. Program models must be developed that will provide instruction which can be measured. At the same time, these children must be received as

Americans with traditions which will add and enrich what is already here. Schools must become havens of acceptance where all students within the classroom community feel safe in sharing who they are and their cultural origins.

The purpose of this article is to share *Bridges Into Diversity (BID)*. This program was a collaborative effort within the School of Integrative Studies in Teacher Education at Western Kentucky University to provide an English language immersion experience for middle school students to improve their English abilities so they can communicate more competently in the English speaking community and school. The literature is very clear about the need for intensive English language training to help ESL students succeed (Rivera, 1988; Soto, 1991). The purpose of the BID program, therefore, was to improve the two fundamental aspects of English proficiency (Cummins, 1984), Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP) of the students, depending on their English language ability, not their age or native language. Such an alternative instructional approach as BID was needed in the community because the wide-range of English language ability represented within each language, made grouping by language unfeasible.

Past Language Instruction Perspectives

In examining historical accounts of American history, it is evident that because of the local control of public education, monolingual approaches to teaching English have not always been the norm (Baron, 1990; Daniels, 1990). However, shortly before the turn of the 20th century, public sentiment began to change. Nativism and antiforeign political sentiment began to surface, and with the approach of World War I, loyalty to the Americanized form of standard English began to increase. Mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe served to reinforce patriotism and immigrants were expected to learn English through direct methods rather than through methods which permitted the use of students' native languages (Auerbach, 1993).

Currently, there is much discussion both for and against using English only in the classroom. There is favorable public sentiment toward teaching ESL students in both their native language and English (Owens, 1988; Riven, 1988; Snow, 1990). According to Auerbach (1993) the findings concur that using the students' native languages "reduces anxiety, enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner centered curriculum development". As language instruction focuses on comprehension and communication, current theoretical models of instruction for ESL students are becoming more learner centered (Ali, 1994; Cheng, 1996). However, the ideal models of instruction are often not put into practice. Local school systems are faced with budget

constraints and personnel limitations in accommodating the multiplicity of native languages. Many local school systems would have to accommodate a dozen or more native languages. Therefore, what is theoretically sound is often practically inefficient.

Current Language Instructional Perspectives

Children with limited English proficiency must learn standard language forms such as phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and semantics through speaking, listening, reading and writing. Their experiences must include acquiring social/cultural understandings as even greetings in different cultures take on different meanings. Instruction needs to be authentic and include doing, practicing, participating, and discovering language forms in meaningful interactions. Communication is a by-product of doing authentic activities together. Shared experiences are a springboard for developing both spoken and written language. New vocabulary is acquired readily because the students have a need to talk to one another in order to participate in the activity. Vocabulary that is acquired through shared experiences must be practiced in order to be maintained. Whole language activities provide students opportunities to experience comprehension in authentic ways. Because of the interactive nature of communication and the multiple interpretations possible, it has been suggested that learners participate in collaborative text encounters with both teachers and peers (Benton & Fox, 1990; Ali, 1994). Because of the instructional need for both speech and reading, ESL students benefit from collaborative efforts of both their speech instructors and their reading teachers. Instruction centered on allowing diversity of responses to printed material and engaging in authentic experiences which promote communication in small group settings has been used successfully (Ali, 1994).

Collaboration Model for Service Delivery

Because of the growing number of bilingual students in the regular classrooms, school boards are feeling the pressure to hire staff to help these students succeed in school (Roseberry-McKibbin, 1995). The educational community has recognized the need for collaboration when educating these ESL students in an immersion curriculum. Commins and Miramontes (1989) reported that teachers generally had three main opinions concerning low achieving ESL students: (1) the students didn't have the concepts needed for work in either language, (2) the students lacked academic support at home, and (3) the students internalized that English was the language for school, but used their native language outside of school.

All too often when teachers perceive that their students lack the cognitive base needed for learning because of what students cannot do in the classroom, the teachers fail to look

for basic underlying abilities that could enable those students to be successful in school. Language proficiency is based on a "need to communicate" or a sociolinguistic perspective. This perspective recognizes that language is used to create a proposition or statement which conveys a wide range of possible intentions which the listener must appropriately interpret. The authenticity of the message reflects each speaker's intent. Language acquisition also requires participation between speakers and listeners in the sharing of either narration or dialogue. Just as the richness of language is acquired by children through play and social interactions, ESL children learn language the same way. Language is learned through experiences which are used to teach content, functional vocabulary and syntax, as well as the pragmatic use of language through speaker-listener interchanges. ESL students also need practice time in which they learn to modify different aspects of the message.

Bridges into Diversity (BID) Program

Bridges Into Diversity, (BID), was a collaborative effort within the School of Integrative Studies in Teacher Education at Western Kentucky University and a local school district to provide an English language immersion experience for middle school students to improve their English ability. Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the community, the students who participated in the program were from three cultures: Spanish, Hindu, and Bosnian. The direct implication of such language diversity is that a bilingual Spanish-English instructor for example could help only a few of these students. Those students whose native language did not match one of the teachers' languages, would not receive instruction in their native language. Faced with the reality of a multilingual classroom and teacher expectations/bias, it was critical to provide those students with the necessary cognitive and language base to learn, since the primary tenet in Kentucky's Education Reform is that "all students can learn."

The instructional model (see Figure 1), therefore addressed language from a communication proficiency perspective using four elements: authenticity, participation, discovery, and practice. These elements were implemented in an input/output construct with the input modalities of auditory comprehension and reading, and the output modalities of verbal expression and writing. The over-riding context of the model remained "meaningful communication." A structural build-up moving from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP) was used to determine the focus of the modality-specific content.

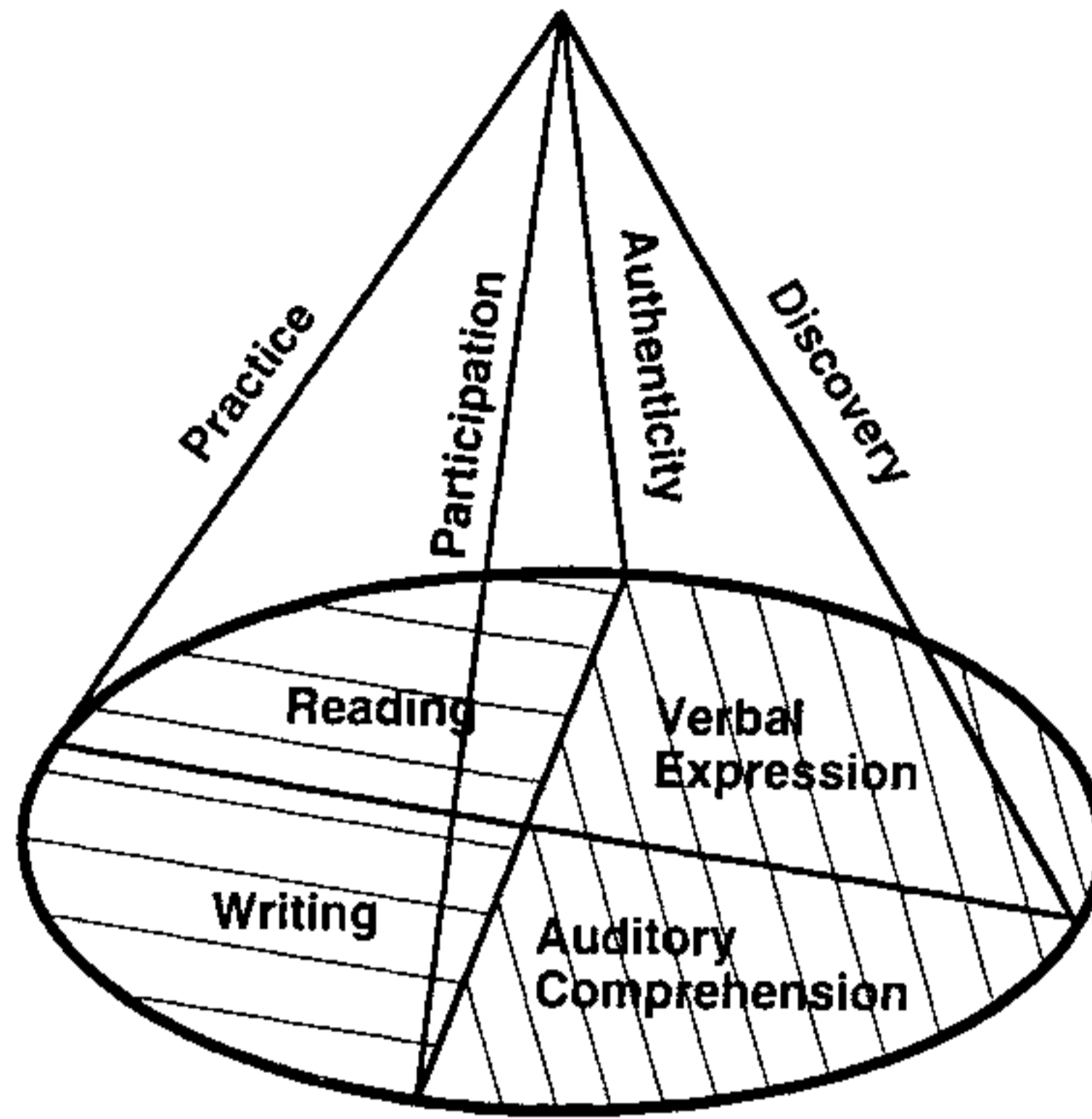


Figure 1.

Bridges into Diversity Program Model

Students were informally assessed for English proficiency with any future grouping not based on native language spoken but on their degree of English language proficiency. Because the students were adolescents, all received instruction in auditory processing, verbal expression, reading, and writing. The curriculum content was modified according to students' proficiencies and interests, ability and the emphasis was either Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) or Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP).

Goals for students placed in the BICS program were initial communicative competence for a range of communication intents, such as requesting, informing, questioning, greeting, and humoring, as well as acquisition of receptive and expressive vocabulary and sentence patterns for use in narration and conversation. Goals for students enrolled in the CALP program were higher level pragmatic skills practice, as well as curricular topics selected by the group. Curricular topics studied included comparative world civilizations and science. When given opportunities for choice, the CALP group consistently selected math word problems from *Developing Key Concepts for Solving Word Problems* developed by Panchyshn and Monroe (1987). These word problems were written with controlled vocabulary and mathematic concepts.

Regardless of the type of program, BICS or CALP, students read and wrote as part of the total program. Texts were selected from the library and were read both in a group and

individually. Texts ranged from student-selected big books to age-appropriate adventure stories. To more directly assess reading fluency and comprehension, self-paced short stories of interest to the students were used, as well as follow up comprehension questions.

Specific skills were identified for each modality (see Figure 2). Using these skills as a reference, it was possible to develop instructional goals and assessments for each modality. For example: Student 1 was proficient in auditory processing but needed additional instruction in narration, which also became the vehicle for improving his reading and writing skills via the Language Experience Approach (Allen, 1976). His expressive language skills were also developed in social situations. Reading improvement was addressed through a whole language perspective (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). Student 2 had recently arrived in our community so her English was very limited, but she was placed in a middle school setting because of her age. The focus of the program for her was introducing BICS both aurally and orally. For reading, big books were used to familiarize her with English vocabulary and English language narration. Narrative writing in Spanish was used as a cultural bridge so that the student could express herself in her native language. The written narrative was then used as a discussion point for English instruction. This procedure followed the “additive approach” in that the focus was on enrichment through the addition of a second language, while still supporting the native language (Soto, 1991).

The students were grouped and regrouped throughout the day participating in multimodality instruction (see Figure 2). Initial large group sessions focused on the social, informal nature of language interaction as the research of Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, and Lucas (1990) suggested since they propose that second language skills are learned and exhibited more quickly in informal situations than in formal, academic situations. Informal situations the students participated in included drawing pictures on the chalkboard and looking at situational pictures and sharing how they were perceived by each individual student. Broken sentence cards and picture books were used to teach vocabulary and to generate communication. Experiential activities such as bowling, ping pong, and visiting places such as a museum, a library, and an athletic center motivated the students to practice their English language skills. These shared activities gave the students experiences they could dictate during Language Experience Approach sessions. The students also used the computer lab to type their daily journals. Social studies games were played to provide the students who were less English proficient with information in their native language to clarify ambiguous messages. Later in the morning, the students were regrouped by ability, using the BICS—CALP dichotomy.

Through the collaborative efforts of speech and reading teachers, the students participated in beneficial, educational activities designed to enable them to improve their

ability to communicate in English. Some students began to speak English, while others became more fluent. Over the course of the summer program, the communication skills of the middle school students were enriched as they received academic support in both formal and informal learning.

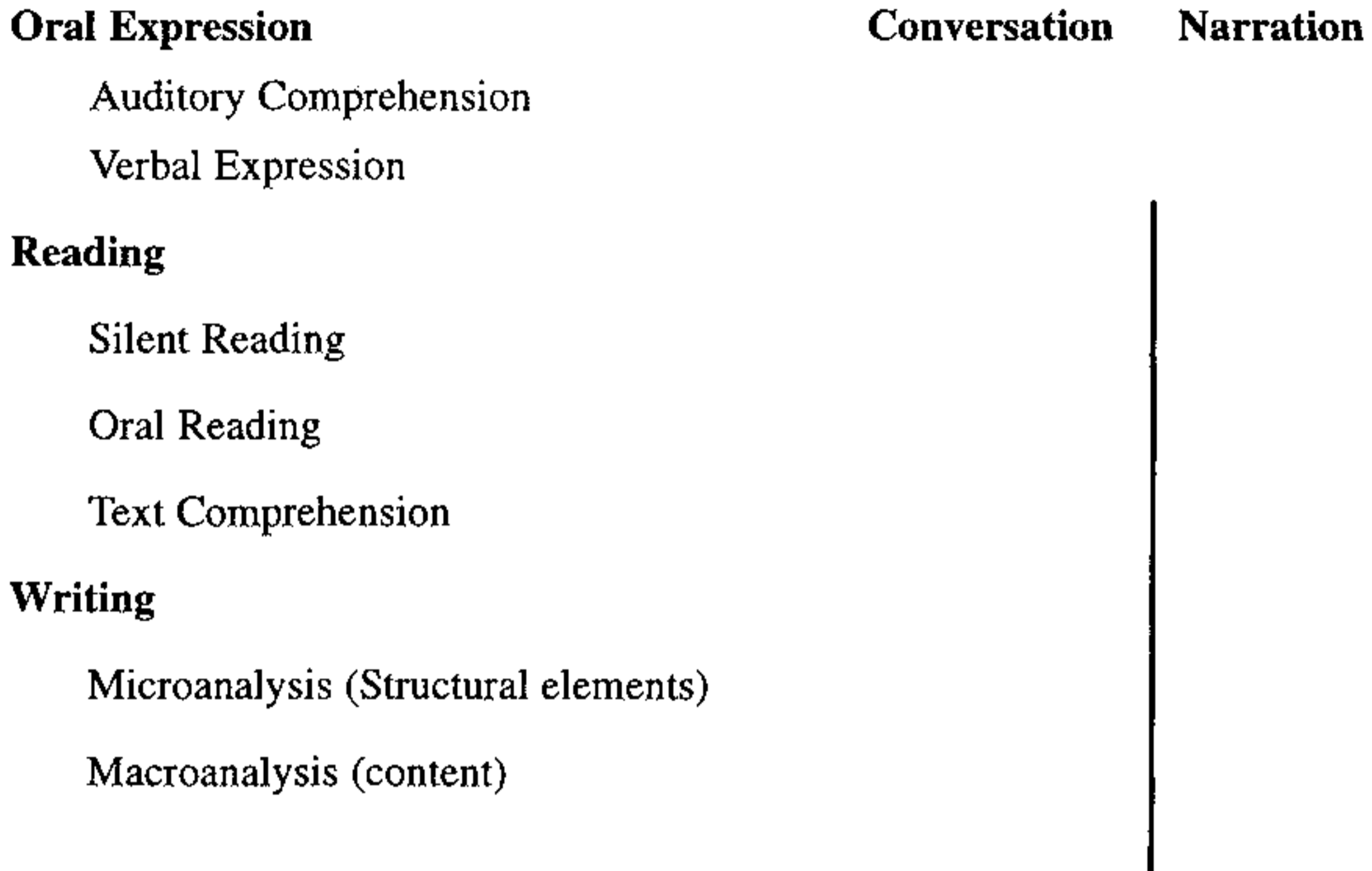


Figure 2.

Multimodality Instruction

Conclusion

An ESL program is a critical component of the services schools need to provide ESL students. Numerous variables need to be considered in student placement, such as age, prior education, and ability. In many school systems, more than one other language is typically present. Thus, a bilingual program such as those used in the past (e.g. Spanish-English) in areas such as Arizona will no longer meet the needs of all the students.

Consequently, school systems need to investigate programs where English is taught from the perspective of a communication model, meaning that language is authentic, participative, features discovery, and affords students' practice. The program content is dictated by either the need to teach Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills or Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency. In either case, the four modalities of communication need to be addressed: receptive and expressive language, as well as reading and writing.

If educators believe that “all students can learn,” then schools must provide programs that enable Limited English Proficient students to succeed. *Bridges into Diversity* provides a powerful model that addresses the communicative and literary needs of ESL children (see Figure 1) and demonstrates that a summer program can make a difference in students’ English language proficiency.

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