

Strategies in Action: Supporting Content Learning

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Third Grade: English-instructed classroom with numerous Multilingual Learners who have a variety of home language and cultural backgrounds.

Setting:

The sign on the door of Ms. Chapman's third grade classroom reads: "Welcome! We are Marine Biologists studying the impacts of humans on the ocean!" and offers context for the crown of seashells over the door frame and the soft sound of whale songs as background as students lean over their desks completing a journal writing activity.

The class is now two weeks into an Ocean Adaptation [thematic unit](#). At the very beginning of the unit, Ms. Chapman allowed children to take home books from the unit library, which included books in several languages spoken by the families in the class. Her students have come to know that they can bring books back and exchange them for others throughout the unit. They have just finished a literature study using the biographies of Rachel Carson (a conservationist) and Olivia Bouler (a young woman who raised funds to save birds after a devastating oil spill). The Designated English Language Development (ELD) lessons for the work honed in on the academic language structures of "cause & effect" so students could analyze the characters' actions and impacts.

Lesson:

Inquiry Chart and Marine Biology Lab

Today, Ms. Chapman has unveiled a new activity center in the classroom where students will be able to engage in various experiments and hands-on learning related to the theme. She knows this kind of tangible inquiry is important for all students, but particularly so for her Multilingual Learners. White lab coats, goggles, and gloves hang from hooks next to a table of beakers and lab tools. Derek enthusiastically suggests they christen the activity center as The Rachel Carson Marine Biology Lab, "Because she challenges us to save the earth!" And the class agrees. Four students, assigned to the Lab during Center Rotations, don their white lab coats, goggles, and gloves, and set to work on the suggested experiments. Ms. Chapman intentionally assigned Diana and Lien to the same lab group so they could engage in discussion using their home language, Mandarin, if they chose.

Today the center focuses on impacts of oil spills on the ecosystem, and students mix oil and water, observe the interaction, experiment with dipping feathers, shells, and sea kelp into the mixtures, and then try out various soaps and solvents to remove the oil. Clipboards have log sheets to jot down observations. The sign above the Lab lays out step-by-step instructions for the experiments, with drawings to make the steps evident for students who are Multilingual Learners. Sentence frames related to reporting Cause & Effect observations and findings support Multilingual learners in talking about their experiments. ("When I _____, I observed _____," "I found that _____ occurs when I _____," "Adding _____ causes _____," etc.). A shelf of informational books in multiple languages (Spanish, Punjabi, and Mandarin) offers resources about how oil spills impact the ocean, as well as many books and

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magazines with photos depicting oil spills. A bulletin board has several news articles reporting recent marine biology news; one about sea turtles immobilized by a brutal winter storm, another about restored coral reefs. An Inquiry Chart poster hangs nearby with marking pens for these budding marine biologists to write or sketch “What We’ve Learned” and “What We Wonder.”

At the end of the day, as Ms. Chapman is tidying up The Rachel Carson Marine Biology Lab, she pauses to reflect on the long list of things students have written on the Inquiry Chart and feels a deep sense of satisfaction at the longer list of new questions these curious minds are generating. She was thrilled to see that Lien and Diana wrote some vocabulary words and their wonderings in Mandarin. Wonderful questions and ideas! And now she has her work cut out for her to find resources to help them pursue the answers.

Reflection questions

1. Ms. Chapman combines both direct instruction, interactive read-alouds, and independent activity centers for her students to explore the content of marine biology. How might the content learning experiences of Multilingual Learners differ across these different instructional activities? What are the language learning benefits and challenges associated with direct content instruction? What about activity centers?
2. Ms. Chapman’s Inquiry Chart offers students the chance to note what they have learned and what they wonder about. How does this enhance the content learning of Multilingual Learners? How do you think Ms. Chapman will go on to use the Inquiry Chart in subsequent lessons?
3. What is one takeaway that you can apply to your own practice in supporting Multilingual Learners’ content learning?