Keys to Learning: Research Base

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General Description of the Program

Student Population

Keys to Learning: Skills and Strategies for Newcomers is intended for students who need to develop language skills in order to study the content areas in an all-English curriculum. It is designed for English as a Second Language (ESL) students at the beginning level of English proficiency who also have limited literacy in their native language. Because they need to develop their kills both in an out of school, these students need literacy development that ranges from phonological awareness and the formation of letters to the tasks of writing and reading both stories and informational texts.

Literacy Focus

The main objective of *Keys to Learning* is to build the skills and experiences these adolescent English language learners need to develop literacy. *Keys to Learning* integrates both ESL and mainstream language arts literacy to bring students up to speed for academic learning. Because the focus is on reading and writing, a grammatical base is established in the first few units so that in subsequent units students can engage in more extensive and sophisticated reading and writing activities. As a result, some grammar patterns, such as the past tense, are introduced earlier in the program than in other beginning level ESL textbooks. An organized sequence of word analysis instruction helps to build the skills needed to read unfamiliar words and to spell correctly. In addition, explicit instruction in learning strategies provides students with keys to help them comprehend what they read and to remember new information and vocabulary. Listening and speaking activities complement the reading topics. Finally, a process approach to writing guides students through planning, drafting, and revising to produce written work that represents their best thinking.

Research Foundations of the Program

Keys to Learning is an outgrowth of a field-initiated study (1997-2001) called "Project Accelerated Literacy" (PAL). Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research Improvement, it was the top-ranked proposal nationally of those submitted in the competing year. PAL was the first comprehensive research study to focus on the acquisition of English literacy by recent adolescent immigrants with low or no literacy in their native language. The study was conducted in fourteen high school ESL classrooms designated as literacy level classes for students with low native language literacy and/or interrupted prior education. Each classroom was studied for an entire academic year. Both standardized tests and research-developed tests were used as pre- and post-test measures.

The results showed wide variability in students' actual native language literacy levels at the onset of the study. Some of these secondary school students were reading at a second grade level in their native language, while others were reading at grade level. Most students could successfully decode words in their native language but could not comprehend what they were decoding. At post-test, all students had made significant progress in developing English literacy, with greater progress made by students who had started with higher literacy levels in their native language.

Two major tasks of the PAL study were (1) to develop an English literacy curriculum that would provide secondary students with the skills and strategies needed to be successful in reading and writing, and (2) to create lessons that would be appropriate to the interests and maturity level of these students. Participating teachers began with differing philosophical and methodological views about teaching reading and writing to secondary school students. A common curriculum was eventually developed through collaboration, a study of research on literacy development at different ages, and a sharing of teaching experiences including learning strategies that really work in the classroom. The result was a balanced approach that included both authentic and quasi-authentic reading, practice with word-attack skills, vocabulary development, explicit learning strategy instruction, and a process approach to writing. Teachers decided on the scope and sequence of content topics, which included typical beginning ESL topics and some content-based topics. This literacy curriculum was then field-tested for two years. The researchers collected weekly teacher comments on the curriculum as it was taught and observed participating classrooms on a regular basis. The PAL curriculum was then revised based on teacher evaluations and classroom implementation notes, and it has formed the basis for *Keys to Learning*.

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