Language Barriers

BY MARY ANN ZEHR

When the first class went to the computer lab, it got what J. David Ramirez considers a "really great" lesson. The students were working in teams and taking full advantage of the computers' research and graphic capabilities.

Ramirez, a researcher at California State University-Long Beach, was at the middle school in the spring of last year as part of a team evaluating an urban district in California. When he found out that some limited-English-proficient students were scheduled to use the lab later that day, he returned to observe their lesson and see how it compared.

"It was the same teacher and lab," he says, "but this group of kids were doing drill sheets on the computer. When I asked the teacher why there was a difference in the activities, she said, 'Well, these kids don't speak English.'"

Not Enough Training

Experts say it's not uncommon for LEP students, also called English-language learners, to get the short end of the stick when it comes to technology. Even when they're lucky enough to get as much time on school computers as their English-proficient classmates, they tend to use it in less meaningful ways.

One reason is that for LEP students to get the most out of technology, they need teachers who are trained both to help them learn English and to use computers effectively in instruction. Unfortunately, that's a rare combination.

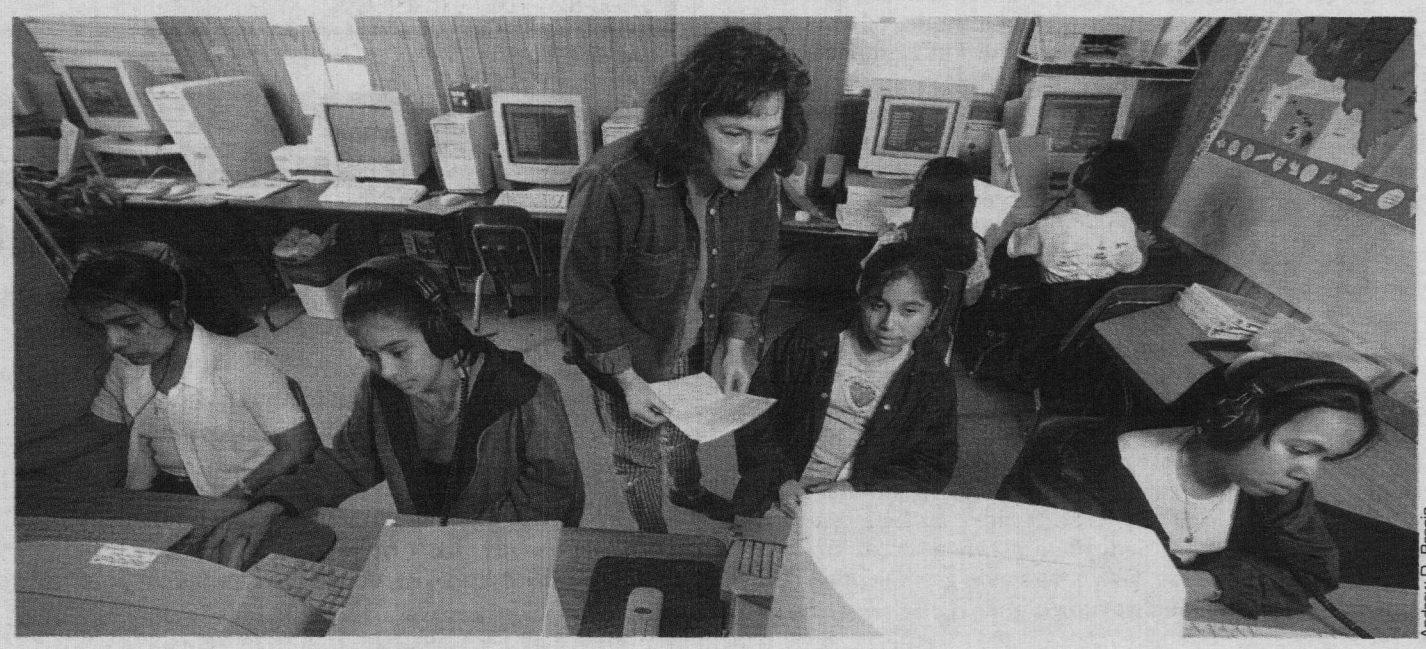
Ramirez notes that out of 600 teachers trained to use technology as part of a "telementoring" project funded by the California legislature in the mid-1990s, only a handful were bilingual education or English-as-a-second-language teachers. One reason was that the project required a minimum level of technology skills for admission to the program, and most of the teachers who worked with LEP students lacked even that, he says. And based on what he's seen recently, Ramirez believes the situation hasn't improved much since then.

Deborah Healey, who trains teachers who work with LEP students at Oregon State University in Corvallis, adds that many ESL teachers and bilingual assistants are hired to work a fixed amount of hours and aren't eligible for release time for in-service training. "There aren't any school districts who tell them not to go [to in-service training], but they don't pay them or give them the time off," she says.

Some schools expect that students with limited English skills will gain access to technology when they spend time in mainstream classrooms. But if the teachers of those classes aren't trained in overcoming language and cultural barriers in their lessons, Healey points out, that access may not be very meaningful. "When you have teachers who are not trained to work with [LEP students]," she says, "they don't know what in the world to do with the kids."

A lack of qualified teachers can limit the effectiveness of federal funding spent on computers, notes Jane E. Lopez, a lawyer for Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy Inc., a nonprofit organization in Boston that monitors services to LEP students there as part of a federal consent decree. She says *those students haven't benefited much from many of* the computer labs that were paid for with money under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

"What we found is there was very little use by the LEP students of computer labs, either because the [bilingual or ESL] teacher didn't take them, or their schedule was full, or there wasn't a bilingual person to assist the students in the lab," Lopez says. "When schools put money into these labs and say, 'All kids benefit,' that's not necessarily the case."


Andrew D. Brosig

Teacher Colleen Hetherington works with students at Center Junior High School in Center, Texas. Hetherington is unusual in that she is technologically savvy and also certified to teach English as a Second Language.

'The Last Space Available'

Often, bilingual education and ESL programs lack equipment to work with in the first place. They tend to be poorly funded and operate on the periphery of schools, where they're less likely to receive computers than mainstream classrooms.

"ESL teachers go into a school and they're allocated the last space available, and even though it's not legal, they'll be working out of closets or in groups that are much too large, or they won't have the 30 minutes a day they should have to be working with students," says Judie Hayes, an ESL teacher at the 450-student Cherry Hill elementary school in River Edge, N.J., who runs a Web site to support ESL teachers. "How can you have a computer if you're working in a hallway?"

Another problem is the lack of high-quality software and Web sites designed for English-language learners. "I don't have any gripes with my school," says Colleen Hetherington, an ESL teacher at the 360-student Center Junior High School in Center, Texas. "My gripes are with the industry. I think they've ignored us."

Hetherington is unusual because she is experienced in teaching students with computers and is also certified to teach English as a second language. She was a full-time computer teacher for nine years before becoming a full-time ESL teacher. Through grants and

other means, Hetherington has obtained 11 computers for her classroom while most teachers in her school have only one or two computers.

But it's been hard to find software that is meaningful for her students, she says, adding that what is available requires a lot of adaptations. Moreover, Hetherington says, it's hard to find software that is sequenced in a way that corresponds with how students learn English as a second language.

"A lot of programs don't have enough controlled use of the vocabulary," she says. "All of a sudden, they start giving instructions in vocabulary that the students don't know."

The Software 'Abyss'

Ellen Wolock, the managing editor of *Children's Software Revue*, in Flemington, N.J., agrees that the software industry has produced little for LEP students. "It's a real hole," she says. "It's silly that there's that much of an abyss."

But an industry expert notes that companies have to look after the bottom line. "Their best bet is to focus on the mainstream, where the largest market is," observes Mark Schneiderman, the director of federal education policy for the Washington-based Software & Information Industry Association.

Subtler issues, such as academic performance and behavior, can also influence how much access LEP students have to technology and how they use it. In some cases, those factors can create inequalities even between LEP students attending the same school.

For example, Hersholt C. Waxman, a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Houston, and two co-researchers found in a recent study of three Texas elementary schools that higher-achieving LEP students used computers more often and for more meaningful activities than lower-achieving LEP students did. Most students in all three schools come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lower-achieving LEP students tended to use computers only after finishing all their other classroom work—and most often for games—while their higher-achieving counterparts used computers more often in classrooms and most often for word processing and other educational purposes, the researchers found.

Expectations Differ

James L. Radomski, an English teacher at the 4,400-student Huntington Park High School in the Los Angeles area, says that the discipline level of his classes also affects students' access to technology.

He's taken his "sheltered" class of students with limited English skills to the computer lab only five times this year, while he's taken his mainstream classes—which include native speakers of English as well as some higher-level LEP students and former LEP students—10 to 15 times.

The LEP class of 35 students in 10th grade has many teenagers who recently arrived from other countries and tend to behave well, Radomski says, but it also includes what he calls "hard core" students who may have been born in the United States but still aren't fluent in English. Some of the long-term LEP students are turned off by school and often disrupt class, Radomski says.

Unfortunately, he says, he believes he can manage the students better in a classroom than in a computer lab. "I'd be the first to say that I didn't use the computers as much because of their behavior," he says.

When Radomski does take the sheltered LEP class to the lab, he says, he either has the students do simple word processing or Internet research that involves highly prescribed steps.

"I could carry them further, ... having them do more in-depth Internet assignments, using my home page as a starting point, and using dictionaries as resources," he says. But, he adds: "They don't get there." ■