The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach.

The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is an instructional model developed to meet the academic needs of students learning English as a second language in American schools (p.3). Based largely on findings of studies on cognition, the model integrates academic language development, content area instruction, and explicit instruction in learning strategies for both content and language acquisition. Since their first proposal of this approach in 1986, Chamot and O’Malley have continuously been working on the model, enlarging and refining it. The CALLA Handbook is the latest outcome of this continued effort. The authors’ goals in writing the book are to provide a foundation for using the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, practical guidelines for designing a CALLA program, and suggestions for implementing CALLA in major subject areas of the curriculum.

The handbook falls into three major parts, each consisting of four chapters. Part I is an introduction to the theoretical basis, the second part discusses the implementation of the model in the classroom, and the third part provides case studies of CALLA programs.
components, and the related instructional concepts of CALLA. The theoretical basis of the approach, which is cognitive learning theory, and related concepts such as language across the curriculum, language experience approach, and cooperative learning are discussed in chapter 1. The components of CALLA, including academic content, learning strategies, and academic language skills, are also introduced in chapter 1, but are discussed in greater detail in chapters 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

Part 2 is concerned with CALLA program design. Chapter 5 of this section discusses planning, teaching and monitoring CALLA. Chapter 6 treats the assessment of students’ progress in CALLA. It is suggested that the teacher can choose, from a number of different types of alternative assessment, the appropriate forms to match the knowledge and skills being measured. Chapter 7 discusses the administration of the CALLA program. The authors state that the administrators have an essential role in the development, implementation, and evaluation of a CALLA program (p.139): identifying teachers for CALLA projects, establishing and maintaining staff communication, enlisting local and district-wide support, implementing the CALLA program, and providing program leadership. Chapter 8 sets out to identify the 12 contexts in which CALLA has been and can be implemented, such as beginning proficiency level, bilingual classrooms and pull-out ESL programs. [-1-]

The final part of the handbook focuses on implementation of CALLA in the classroom. Here, the authors outline sample CALLA units for science, mathematics, social studies, and literature to illustrate how CALLA principles can be translated into lesson plans for different subject areas. The handbook also contains a preface, a list of tables, a section of references and an index, plus an impressive outline for an integrated CALLA unit.

One of the important characteristics of the handbook is its practical orientation. First, the discussion of the theoretical aspects of CALLA is kept to a minimum, briefly and clearly done in certain sections of part 1. The rest of the book is devoted to discussing the design of a CALLA program and the implementation of CALLA. Second, each of the first 8 chapters has a section of “Application Activities” which can enhance the understanding of the main ideas or points discussed in the chapter. The practical nature of the handbook is also manifested by the inclusion of tables containing useful ideas, information, and suggestions concerning CALLA which can be readily used or expanded or amended.

Another impressive characteristic of the handbook is its ingenious design. Each chapter begins with a brief overview and a table of contents. Major ideas and points of each section are summarized and highlighted. For example, the following is the highlighted summary of the section discussing types of learning strategies: Metacognitive Strategies: used in planning for learning, self-monitoring, and evaluating achievement. Metacognitive Knowledge: understanding one’s own learning processes, the nature of the learning task, and the strategies that should be effective. Cognitive Strategies: manipulating the material to be learned through rehearsal, organization, or elaboration. Social/Affective Strategies: interacting with others for learning or using affective control for learning (p. 64). The book also contains a number of excellent drawings and graphs for illustration of important ideas and techniques. These make the reading task easier.

A further distinct feature of the handbook is its logical organization. The book begins with the rationale and components of CALLA, then examines the design of the CALLA program and finally moves to a discussion of the implementation of CALLA in the classroom. This logical organization makes it possible for the book to be used not only as a reference book but also as a textbook for CALLA staff development.
Some criticism may be directed toward chapter 8, where the authors have tried to apply CALLA to a large number of contexts. We do not doubt that CALLA works for intermediate level ESL students in upper elementary and secondary grades, since it was originally developed to respond to the needs of these students and has been constantly tested and improved. It may have wide applications. However, trying to apply the model to a dozen contexts seems ambitious.

In conclusion, the handbook can be used both as a resource book and textbook for classroom teachers interested in the CALLA model, provided they are aware of its limitations. The handbook can also be used by language and content area teachers who wish to draw some practical ideas and to adapt some activities to their own teaching situations.

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