



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

by José A. Cárdenas, 1994
IDRA Founder & Director Emeritus

**Special Edition Serial Release
for IDRA's 50th Anniversary**

Chapter 18: The Verbs

As a school principal, supervisor and superintendent, I have had ample opportunity to visit classrooms. Invariably I take exception to the great amount of speaking done by the teacher and the little amount of speaking done by the students. This problem is especially critical when a large number of the students in the classroom are limited-English-proficient and are in desperate need of language development activities. Most of the teachers do not realize the extent to which they tend to dominate classroom language activity. As superintendent of a school district comprised of over 90% Mexican American children, of which more than half had limited proficiency in the English language, I became extremely sensitive to this problem. At one point I acquired a video camera and had some technicians video tape specific classrooms. I subsequently allowed the teachers to review the video tape and make the inevitable discovery that the children contributed little to verbal communications in the classroom.

A similar problem that I commonly encountered was the failure of instructional personnel to adapt the instructional program to the language characteristics of students. Instructional materials are commonly developed for typical English background students with the assumption made that the students have sufficient mastery of the English language to profit from the instructional activity. When this assumption built into the materials is erroneous, the consequences can be disastrous. I don't advocate a slow-paced, watered-down instructional program, but on the other hand, teaching content material to students who do not understand the language is fruitless.

One Monday morning, I walked in on a language arts class comprised of limited-English-proficient Hispanic students. The teacher was just introducing a new unit on verbs.

"All right, students. You did very well last week on nouns. This week we start a new unit on verbs. How many of you read the lesson on verbs I assigned last Friday?"

About three-fourths of the students raised a hand.

"That's good. Did all of you understand the lesson? Do you have any questions on the lesson before we begin? Do you have any questions about verbs?"

Not a single hand went up.

"All right. First, we want to find out what a verb is. What is a verb?"

No one seemed anxious to respond since not a single hand went up.

“All right class. What is a verb? If you read your lesson, you surely know what a verb is?”

No response from the students.

“Can one of you students tell me what a verb is?” “Anybody?” “Can anyone of you students tell us something about a verb?”

The silence was very uncomfortable and would have gotten worse, except one little boy raised his hand.

“All right, Tomás. I can see that you read the lesson. Tell the class something about a verb.”

Little Tomás stood up. He placed his hands under his armpits, flapped his arms up and down and said, “Teacher, a verb, it flies.”