

English Language Learners: What Works

Donna Newberg-Long

University of Denver

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for QRM4920

Dr. Ellen Steiner

July 20, 2007

Introduction

One of the most compelling issues in education today is how to raise student achievement for English Language Learners (ELLs). According to the on-line glossary of the Center for Research Education, Diversity and Excellence (What Works Clearinghouse), the definition of ELL is a student whose first language is not English and who either lacks proficiency in English or has beginning proficiency in English.

The pressures of the No Child Left Behind legislation have increased the nation's sense of urgency to meet the needs of ELLs, however, the heart of the matter lies in the fact that educators are having to define or alter their beliefs about whether or not all students can achieve at high levels in order to accomplish this goal. If this is true, then finding ways to help ELLs to read, write and comprehend in their new English language is essential.

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to become more knowledgeable about what works for ELLs so that these strategies and beliefs can be implemented in classrooms at Remington, a preschool to sixth grade elementary school in Northwest Denver. As Instructional Coordinator, I have been studying approaches and best practices for ELLs, but have yet to study a wide variety of juried articles and research done on the subject. This literature review is focused on research that can clarify how best to serve ELLs.

Common threads have emerged through this research for what works best to make ELLs successful. These themes can be broken into three categories: instruction, strategies, and mental models.

Instruction

Mohr (2007) considered what classroom teachers could do to more fully engage ELLs in teacher-student interactions. She studied how mainstream teachers helped Spanish-speaking immigrant students become successful in school and was struck by the missed opportunities that occurred within the classrooms. The need for a shift in how we interact with students in the classroom would lead to greater progress of all students, especially ELLs. Learning is not only dependent on the teacher. Merisuo-Storm (2007) researched pupil's attitudes as a determinant in the acquisition of a foreign language. Her study was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in student attitudes between the monolingual and bilingual classes and found that where both languages are spoken, the students made greater progress academically than their peers in English only classrooms. She found that students were more confident and able to take risks in English that led to higher achievement in the end.

For students to comprehend English as an ELL, they must understand the how and the why of what they must know to be successful (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller & Leclere, 2006-2007). Research also tells us that there is a strong link between the development of literacy and English language acquisition. To do well in literacy, explicit instruction, teacher modeling, and time for practice in the new language are essential.

Rather than allowing ELLs to remain silent, teachers can enlarge their use of response protocols that engage these students at higher levels (Mohr 2007). These include increasing time for student talk, clarifying instructions and questions, rephrasing to facilitate student comprehension, and the creating an environment that is conducive to high quality interaction with learners. A student who began school with a serious lack of

confidence and ability to hide what he did not know began being highly engaged when his teacher built a relationship of trust with him (Palmer, et al 2006-2007). By meeting every day for 45 minutes to learn strategies for making meaning in English, he became eager to learn more and applied the learning to other parts of his instructional day. This led to greater achievement levels and progress in acquiring English skills.

Saunders, Foorman, & Carlson, (2006) observed 85 kindergarten classrooms to determine the effects of a separate block of time, called the English Language Development (ELD) block, on success of ELLs. The demographics of the schools studied had at least 40% Hispanic students and represented the four major models for teaching ELLs. They found that students in classrooms with a separate ELD block made significantly higher gains in both oral and literacy scores. The ELD block provides ample opportunity to build essential vocabulary for ELLs.

Silverman (2007) focused on instruction that included vocabulary interventions. She refers to the large numbers of students who come to kindergarten without sufficient vocabulary to support language acquisition, and the ELD block supports this instruction. Based on the research of Baker, Gersten, Haager, & Dingle, (2006), ELLs will benefit from what works for students from high-poverty backgrounds. It is known that use of sheltered instructional techniques will enhance learning for all students. Baker, et al (2006) has deducted that socioeconomic status and background knowledge are associated with children's vocabulary learning. Baker, et al (2006) refer to the necessity to integrate a strong vocabulary component to the teaching of early reading. Results from the study by Silverman (2007) compares the level of vocabulary learning for English Only students

(EOs) and those in bilingual classes and found that ELLs can achieve faster rates of growth than EOs in vocabulary if the instruction is appropriate.

Verdugo & Flores (2007) highlighted the need for better teacher preparation for instructing ELLs. A number of the studies referred to the benefits of using student's native language, explicit skills instruction (Mohr 2007; Palmer, et al 2006-2007; & Verdugo, et al 2007) and opportunities for student practice.

The focus of this literature review was not to determine which model of instruction was best among the four currently practiced models. These are sheltered immersion, transitional bilingual, two way bilingual, and sink or swim. Therefore, this review will not compare them except to say that students in bilingual classes demonstrated more interest in learning English and made greater progress in both languages than EOs (Silverman 2007).

Assessment is another important aspect of instruction. Baker, et al (2006) focused on a measurement tool for assessing the progress of ELLs. The study was the result of a large increase in ELLs in California who were required to learn to read in English, unless their parents opted out of the program. Through this tool, they were able to predict classroom growth in reading in relation to teacher quality and instructional practices, something that we struggle to assess.

There is a strong link between the development of literacy and English language acquisition. "Pupils who achieved a poor level of literacy were less successful in their English studies than fluent readers and writers," according to Merisuo-Storm (2007) (p237). Palmer, et al (2006-2007) also referred to this connection. The Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (BCIRC) program (What Works

Clearing house 2007) demonstrated potential to have a positive effect on ELLs reading achievement. The focus of their study was on second through fifth grade students. They used a constructivist framework to facilitate student cooperative learning discussions and discourse. All researchers concluded that high expectations for ELLs are essential to their success in school.

Instruction is not the only area that needs to be identified and adjusted to make ELLs successful in making a transition to English. Classroom strategies that also work are important.

Strategies

There are many strategies that were found to allow ELLs access to learning in the classroom and to facilitate acquisition of English language. Mohr (2007) found that well thought out teacher-led question-and-answer sequences that challenged thinking allowed students to feel respected and interested in the content and the learning. All researchers referred to the need to establish routines that would scaffold the structures to facilitate meaning. Making meaning of a new language means the student must understand many of the nuances that lie in the culture. Palmer, et al (2006-2007) determined that comprehension of figurative language in English is essential to academic and social success of ELLs, and pointed out the disparity between literal and figurative meanings in English. They referenced the findings of Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson & Johnson (1989) who reported that more than 10% of classroom teacher talk contains figurative language. Teachers also use idiomatic expressions in one out of 10 words. Teachers who are mono-lingual in English may make many assumptions with ELLs. They often fail to give enough support for them to comprehend what is being taught. Using sayings or

words that make no sense unless you grew up in this culture is unfair to ELLs. Palmer, et al (2007) referred to “raining cats and dogs” and the use of the word “hot,” for instance. Use of hot in hot rod is very different from the way it is used for a hot stove, for instance.

The reading teacher in the Palmer, et al (2007) study followed the three-step problem-solving process for interpreting figurative language put forth by Simmons & Palmer (1994) and had excellent results:

Step 1: Help the student to find the figurative language.

Step 2: Try its literal meaning

Step 3: Find its intended meaning.

The use of drawing to assist in understanding also produced good results.

Through the use of written conversations (Sluys & Laman, 2006), students were able to practice writing in authentic situations where they wrote both formally and informally for a variety of purposes, audiences and conventions. This is an example of a strategy that had a very positive impact on student learning for ELLs. Another commonly used strategy in classrooms today is the use of graphic organizers (GOs) to enhance comprehension for all students, however, based on this research of Jiang & Grabe (2007), the evidence is inconclusive. They studied the implications of graphic organizers on specific major text structures and were unable to find much difference between the use of these or having students use outlining to assist with comprehension. Some positive results were found when there was a great deal of training prior to use of GOs, but only in understanding and clarifying text structures.

Silverman (2007) investigated the use of read-a-louds and the acquisition of English. The results of vocabulary intervention for ELLs gave very positive results as it

made the content being taught comprehensible to students. To do well in literacy, explicit instruction, teacher modeling, patient use of wait time, higher order thinking, and time for practice in the new language are essential (Mohr 2007). Since it is impossible to meet the needs of so many diverse language acquisition levels within a single classroom, the use of small groups and cooperative learning can lead to positive results using differentiated instruction (Baker 2006; & Mohr 2007).

Citing many researchers who have studied the benefits of various strategies to enhance the learning of ELLs, Verdugo, et al (2007) gave an overall perspective of the work in areas such as teacher preparation, use of student's native language, explicit skills instruction and opportunities for student practice to enhanced learning for ELLs. The research of Baker, et.al (2006); Palmer, et al (2006-2007); & Mohr (2007) concurs.

Mental Models

To best serve ELLs in their learning, we must address the negative stereotypes that suppress student achievement. Mohr (2007) put forth the idea that teachers must be careful not to make wrong assumptions about their ELLs and must make efforts to understand the culture from which they come. She warned that immigrant students' culture may have different expectations than ours. The teacher must build a relationship of trust with the student and not give in to the idea that ELLs can just be left to be silent when they are beginning to learn English. Rather, use of scaffolding for understanding and planning language objectives based on individual student needs will help to engage these learners and give them access to the learning. Palmer, et al (2006-2007) (p265) states, "Teachers must assume that all students are capable of learning English given the proper support, appropriate instruction, and adequate time."

Conclusions

According to Verdugo, et al (2007), researchers do not know for sure what will best lead to success in school for ELLs. Although more research is needed on instruction, strategies and mental models that facilitate learning for ELLs, there is much evidence that conscious scaffolding of specific strategies for these students, along with trust and the building of positive relationships, will lead to academic success for ELLs.

Appropriate instruction for ELLs, based on research, includes strategies for understanding figurative language embedded in the English language, explicit instruction, wait time, higher order thinking, use of authentic learning through written conversations in the classroom, sheltered support for transitioning students, and small group instruction, however more research is needed. ELLs in Bilingual classrooms showed greater progress in the learning of English language learning when a separate period for English Language Development was set aside each day in elementary classrooms. Increasing classroom/student talk is vital to English language learning. As stated by Mohr (2007), teachers can engage less proficient or reticent students by incorporating various response options to encourage students' participation and help develop language proficiency.

There is a strong link between the development of literacy and English language acquisition. All researchers concluded that high expectations for ELLs are essential to their success in school. Future research is needed in the assessment of figurative language with ELLs. Small group instruction and differentiation, overcoming language and culture barriers and pre-service and in-service training for teachers based on research will lead to greater academic and social success for our ELLs.

References

- Baker, S., Gersten, R., Haager, D., Dingle, M. (2006). Teaching practice and the reading Growth of first-grade English learners: validation of an observation instrument. *Elementary School Journal* (107) 2, p199—221.
- Jiang, X. (2007). Graphic Organizers in Reading Instruction: research findings and issues. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, (19) 1, p34—5.
- Lazar, R.T., Warr-Leeper, G.A., Nicholson, C.B., & Johnson, S. (1995). The effects of different tasks on the comprehension and production of idioms in children. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, (60) p261—283.
- Merisuo-Storm, T. (2007). Pupil's attitudes towards foreign-language learning and the development of literacy skills in bilingual education. *Teaching and Teacher Education* (23) 2, p226—239.
- Mohr, K. (2007). Extending English-language learners' classroom interactions using the response protocol. *The Reading Teacher* (60) 5, p440—170.
- Palmer, B., Shackelford, V., Miller, S., Leclere, J. (2006-2007). Bridging two worlds: reading comprehension, figurative language instruction, and the English language learner. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (50) 4, p258—266.
- Saunders, W., Foorman, B., Carlson, C. (2006). Is a separate block of time for oral English language development in programs for English learners needed? *Elementary School Journal* (107) 2, p181—199.
- Silverman, R. (2007). Vocabulary development of English-language and English-only

- learners in kindergarten. *Elementary School Journal* (107) 4, p365—384.
- Sluys, K., Laman, T. (2006) Learning about language: written conversations and elementary language learners. *International Reading Association* (60) 3, p 222—232.
- Verdugo, R., Flores, B. (2007) English-language learners: key issues. *Education and Urban Society* (39) 2, p167—193.
- What Works Clearinghouse. (2007). “Bilingual cooperative integrated reading and composition. What works clearinghouse intervention report.”
<http://www.whatworks.ed.gov>