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PROMISING LITERACY PRACTICES FOR STUDENTS WITH INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING COMPETENCE WITH ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACROSS DISCIPLINES

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Abstract: Rapidly growing numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U.S. schools and increased accountability measures in the nation's education have drawn the attention of educational practitioners and researchers to determining effective instructional models and practices designed to meet academic needs of these students. English language learners (ELLs) with weak educational backgrounds and limited literacy in native languages, or Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), find themselves at a disadvantage compared to not only their English speaking peers but other ELL subgroups as in addition to developing English language proficiency while simultaneously studying the required grade-level disciplines, ELLs who are also SIFEs are challenged to perform triple the work of bridging the gaps in knowledge and literacy they failed to learn in their home countries. This article addresses the unique challenges the ELL SIFE students face as they advance their academic careers through the nation's system of education, particularly at the high school level. The article gives recommendations on promising educational practices, including innovating approaches and strategies to support and supplant effective literacy instruction for these students.

Rapidly growing numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U. S. schools and increased accountability measures in education have drawn the attention of educational practitioners and researchers to determining effective instructional models and practices designed to meet academic needs of these students. English language learners (ELLs) currently comprise 9% of the total Pre-K-12 population nationwide (NCELA, 2015a); and it is projected that by 2050, just Hispanics will comprise 30% of the nation's total school population (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011). ELLs represent an extremely heterogeneous population of students due to the differences in cultural, ethnic, linguistic and educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, and immigration experiences. One similarity ELLs seem to share is their academic underachievement when they do not receive

appropriate and high quality academic instruction. Cucchiara (2015) attributed ELLs' lack of academic progress to educators' failure to (a) "recognize the role played by language itself in literacy," and (b) explicitly teach and amply expose students to the "grammatical structures and devices" (p. 3) of disciplinary discourse patterns of academic English; ELLs were given easy texts, and never had a chance to work with complex texts.

Proficiency with academic language register across disciplinary domains is paramount for becoming a literate individual in the 21st century (Silliman & Wilkinson, 2014). The Common Core Standards and the New Generation State Standards (further referred to as the Standards) promote this register as a tool that all students must develop to master college and career readiness standards (American College Testing, 2011; College Board, 2012).

In order to prepare ELLs to participate in the discussions implied by the Standards, all features of academic language register must be explicitly taught and practiced in the classroom across all content areas. An important change in ELL instruction must occur from traditional “remedial in nature” (Cucchiara, 2015, p. 1) that contributed to academic underperformance to instruction that “accelerates learning, language and literacy” (p. 1).

Academic and social needs of ELLs differ in significant ways. Although all ELLs face multiple challenges, particular attention must be paid to those students who recently arrived to the United States as immigrants or refugees from countries where poverty, civil unrest, and natural disasters affected their opportunities for schooling as they entered American high schools based on their age. In addition, these ELLs have a barrier to learning because their parents also lack the skills of learning based on language issues and difficulties communicating between one another (McClure, 2011). Also referred to as ELL Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), this ELL population is the most susceptible among ELLs for academic failure due to their rudimentary or no native language literacy, and significant gaps in grade level disciplinary knowledge. The number of ELL SIFE in American schools has increased as the global number of children and adolescents not enrolled in school is on the rise. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UNESCO, 2015), in 2013, 124 million children between ages 6 and 15 have either never started school or have dropped out compared to 122 million in 2011. McClure (2011) stated that “immigrant children attending high-LEP, segregated, and high-poverty schools stand to become undereducated in America” (p. 4).

Upon their enrollment in the U.S. high schools, ELL SIFE have much more to learn than just English; yet they are held to the same standards and are expected to graduate within the same amount of time as other students. Academic and social needs and challenges ELL SIFE face differ from those of ELLs. Oral

language and literacy skills in the native language and in English, and previous schooling experiences in native countries are a strong predictor of ELLs’ academic success. Without the benefits of either, it is not surprising that ELL SIFE demonstrated the slowest rate of English and literacy development, particularly in the first couple years of high school, compared to their literate and partially or fully schooled in home language ELL peers (Short & Boyson, 2012). It is important for educators to recognize the variability among ELLs’ challenges and needs to ensure that: (a) timely and appropriate pedagogical adjustments are being made to meet their academic needs, and high-quality instruction is provided to maximize their learning; and (b) the ELL SIFE’s slow academic progress that naturally occurs at the beginning stages of schooling, was not misinterpreted for a learning disability and led to their misplacement in special education.

ELL SIFE Challenges

ELL SIFE’s weak educational backgrounds and limited literacy in native languages place them at a disadvantage compared to not only their English speaking peers but other ELLs as in addition to developing English language proficiency while simultaneously studying the required grade-level disciplines, the ELL SIFE are challenged to perform triple the work of bridging the gaps in knowledge and literacy they failed to learn in their home countries. This additional barrier of acquiring English literacy without the benefit of linguistic transfer, and bridging educational gaps in their knowledge prior to being able to access information in high school level texts poses immediate threat to ELL SIFE academic success.

The above-mentioned challenges are exacerbated at the high school level because of the limited time students have to graduate. “Developing a full English proficiency takes at least a decade of schooling – if not longer” (Berman, as cited in Silliman & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 117); it is not surprising that many ELL SIFE get discouraged and drop out of school, while the majority of those committed to persist *age out* of school by reaching the age

of 21 prior to being able to meet high school graduation requirements.

To exacerbate the problem, newly arrived high school ELL SIFE enroll at an age beyond which literacy instruction is usually provided to students, and many teachers are not prepared to incorporate basic literacy components, such as alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency while maintaining the rigor of the grade-level instruction (Short & Boyson, 2012; Zwiars, 2008). In addition to the aforementioned challenges, ELL SIFE face psycho-social issues while trying to adjust and acculturate to the new country and school system resulting in the forecast for academic success of this student population without additional supports beyond those offered to other ELLs is far from being favorable.

ELL SIFE Impact on High Schools

As the nation strives to provide equal educational opportunities to all students, build capacity to meet the Standards, and hold educators accountable for student learning outcomes, teachers and school leaders of high schools with high numbers of ELL SIFE populations place their jobs on the line as they struggle to meet the needs of these students within the limited school budgets. To exemplify the challenges some American high schools with high numbers of ELL SIFE face, the researchers will share their experiences of working at a public Title I high school located in the southern community of a northern Florida county the area that in the last 4 years evidenced an increase in refugee immigrants from Guatemala. The selected urban high school in this article serving approximately 1,687 students in Grades 9-12 has experienced a significant increase in ELL SIFE population from 16% or 34 students of the total ELL population in 2011 to almost 60% or 104 students in 2015. With the limited resources, the selected high school faced an analogous problem of providing appropriate and high quality education for ELL SIFE. Specifically, research suggests low teacher-student ratio, appropriate instructional resources, timely and on-going teacher training, and extended

instructional time are beneficial for ELL SIFE (Ziemke, 2014) remain the unattainable commodities with the limitations of the Title I high school budget.

In an effort to address ELL SIFE academic needs several programs were implemented, including an extended-day program with the in-class instructional support in core academic disciplines, the literacy development I-Pad program I-Lit, and after-school tutoring in academic subjects and vocational training component. The extended-day program was discontinued after a year of implementation as ELL SIFE inability to stay after school due to extenuating life situations: many had jobs to support their families, or had to babysit their younger siblings to enable parents' employment. The instructional support in the core disciplines was also discontinued due to limited budget. The literacy development program I-Lit is used with ELLs in Intensive Reading Classes. The success of these programs on ELL SIFE's achievement is difficult to measure due to the expected slow rate of academic progress of these students, particularly at the first year of their instruction; however, positive feedback about the programs from students, parents, and educators was received.

ELL SIFE dropout rate of approximately 90% and 0% graduating from high school with a regular diploma in 2015 signify that the problem of effectively educating this population persists at the selected high school. It is imperative that educators, administrators, and policy-makers have a clear understanding of the challenges and needs of this population, have realistic expectations for the ELL SIFE academic progress, and most importantly, provide support necessary to appropriately educate these students in terms of suitable instructional resources, personnel development, targeted interventions, and curricular and programmatic options.

This article aims to focus attention of educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers on the challenges and needs of ELL SIFE population to communicate promising academic interventions aimed at helping this underprivileged student subgroup

function successfully in the United States education system and beyond.

In their study examining the challenges recently arrived immigrant ELLs face at the secondary school level, Short and Boyson (2012) underscored the importance of recognizing the differences in academic needs of different types of ELLs to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students. Newly arrived adolescent ELLs with gaps in formal schooling are at risk in high schools across America (Short & Boyson, 2012). In their national study, Short and Boyson conducted a targeted nationwide search for programs and sites that offer supports for newly arrived ELLs and examined 63 programs in which one third of enrolled ELLs were identified as ELL SIFE students. The study revealed that successful educational programs were aware of the unique needs of ELL SIFE students and provided targeted academic interventions aimed at meeting the needs of this susceptible to academic failure ELL subgroup.

Although the lack of ELL student performance has been the hot topic on the agenda of educational researchers and practitioners for the last couple decades, we do not have national statistics on graduation rates and academic performance of the ELL SIFE subgroup thus limiting research-based studies that aim to increase this student subgroup's academic achievement. The recent national data shows the lack of ELLs' academic progress, and the persisting achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking counterparts despite the abundance of evidence-validated research aimed at improving ELL achievement. Between 2005 and 2014, the percentage of Grade 8 ELLs scoring below basic level in reading decreased by only 1% while the percentage of students scoring proficient decreased by one point (USDOE, NCES, 2014). The lack of ELL academic progress in the last decade is particularly significant at the high school level. The achievement gap in reading scores between ELLs and non-ELLs widened by grade from 39

points in Grade 4, to 45 points in Grade 8, and to 53 points in Grade 12 (NCELA, 2015a). As passing of the standardized reading assessment is part of many graduation requirements, the ELL graduation rate was negatively impacted. Specifically, in 2011-2012, only 59% of newly arrived ELLs received a regular high school diploma within four years of starting ninth grade for the first time (NCELA, 2015b). It is predicted that if a student speaks English with difficulty, his or her chances to graduate are reduced by 82% (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

Although some school districts across the nation are aware of the challenges the ELL SIFE face and provide some sort of interventions to meet the needs of this student subgroup, many schools fail to provide supports to their most disadvantaged ELL subgroup beyond those offered for ELLs, such as sheltered instruction or bilingual education. Meeting the needs of all students through the rigor of Common Core standards and disciplinary academic language development to achieve educational equity and upward social mobility of underprivileged populations is a paramount priority in education.

Promising Educational Practices for ELL SIFE Students

Employing the synergy of approaches. With the advent of the more rigorous Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and New Generation State Standards (NGSS) in education, the need for a sound, comprehensive and research-based pedagogy for all ELL subgroups has increased prompting administrators and teachers to look at ways ELLs might progress faster toward proficiency on the national and state assessments. The standards call for students to develop a wide range of strategies to be able to interpret multimedia sources, engage in meaningful discussion with the text, utilize a variety of genres and registers for different purposes and in a variety of contexts, critically analyze, evaluate and synthesize information to transform or create new texts (Ehren, Lenz, &

Deshler, 2014; Fang, 2014). The major shifts in education transformed the ways teachers teach and students learn. Knowing one approach that dictates a particular set of practices is no longer sufficient for the 21st century learning to take place. Educators must be well-versed in a variety of approaches, their strengths, limitations, and complementarities to be able to employ the synergy of approaches, including linguistic, socio-cultural, critical, and cognitive, to maximize the development of the linguistic capacities and disciplinary literacies of all students (Fang, 2014; Stone & Learned, 2014). In the last decade, cognitive and socio-cultural approaches dominated the educational arenas in the country. Rooted in the philosophy of cognitive and socio-cultural approaches, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model has been extensively with various grade levels nationwide. The effectiveness of this model stems from a set of practices that make instruction more comprehensible and texts more accessible for ELLs. Although the SIOP model is a very powerful approach to teaching ELLs in content area classes, it is only effective with ELL students who achieved at least intermediate level of English language development. The model is designed to follow an initial second language acquisition program, such as a bilingual education program, or an English immersion program that develop ELLs from non-English speaker to intermediate English speaker (Temple, Ogle, Crawford, & Freppon, 2014). If used or misused with non-English speakers or beginner level speakers, the SIOP model disadvantages the ELLs as it becomes a submersion approach, which is truly a “sink or swim approach . . . often observed as the default methodology in working with English language learners . . . [as] a reflection of a school’s inability to respond to the[ir] needs” (Temple et al., 2014, p. 479).

Recommendations for ELL SIFE students. The following promising programmatic offerings must be considered for newly arrive ELL SIFE students: a bilingual education program, an English immersion

program, or native language instruction program. These programs provide ample native language support indispensable for ELL SIFE students at the beginning stages of their academic careers in the United States. Since many ELL SIFE students are not able to read texts even in their mother tongues, they rely heavily on auditory means of the only language they understand, which is their native spoken language. The SIOP model draws heavily from the strengths of cognitive and socio-cultural approaches; however, the benefits of linguistic approach within the model were not fully understood and utilized by educators (Ehren, Lenz, & Deshler, 2014).

Linguistic approach: Focus on language development across disciplines. Although English Language development standards have been the focus of many instructional models designed for ELLs, their significance for content learning was often overlooked by educators. Ehren, Lenz, and Deshler (2014) asserted that “the relationship of language learning and specific domain learning was not fully understood by educators” (p. 629) resulting in teaching disciplinary content without addressing the language. Placing academic language at the forefront of college and career readiness, the Common Core and the new state standards require mastery of disciplinary literacy and effective use of academic language register within each content area. Hakuta, Santos, and Fang (2013, p. 451) maintained that “Language and content are inseparable . . . [and] Learning the language of each academic discipline is essential to learning disciplinary content.” With greater content sophistication, the role language plays in academic learning escalates exponentially; therefore, teachers must address language correlates as they teach skills, strategies, subject matter, and higher-order thinking, particularly with ELLs. “English language proficiency and disciplinary knowledge can be developed simultaneously in the context of content instruction” (Hakuta, Santos, & Fang, 2013, p. 451).

Ehren, Lenz, and Deshler (2014) emphasized the importance of enhanced focus on language embedded into discipline-specific content instruction through: “(a) teacher awareness of the literacy demands of their texts; (b) scaffolding student comprehension of cognitively demanding texts with before, during, and after reading activities; (c) teacher modeling of processing of discipline-specific texts; and (d) classroom discussions on how to make meaning of texts” (p. 627). Educators must assume responsibility for explicitly teaching the language of their content areas to improve all students’ disciplinary literacy (Ehren, Lenz, & Deshler, 2014; Fang, 2014; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Moore, 2014; Hakuta, Santos, & Fang, 2013; Short & Boyson, 2012; Silliman & Wilkinson, 2014). While knowledge of the subject matter is a necessary prerequisite to good teaching, being an expert in their discipline is not enough. Teachers must have the skills to make the content knowledge comprehensible for the students by discussing the structures and the meanings of the disciplinary texts to increase student engagement and enhance student learning (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Lukin, 2008).

Functional Language Analysis

To assist ELL SIFE students in meeting the challenge of the Common Core and state standards, to help them understand how language works, and to unpack multiple layers of meaning coded in complex disciplinary texts, educators need to employ new strategies to equip students with new ways of making meaning and using language to participate in disciplinary oral and written discourses in the classroom. In the past decade, educators employed reading approaches that emphasize comprehension strategies, such as visualizing, summarizing, asking questions, making inferences and predictions. These strategies are beneficial only if students are capable of *breaking the code* or unpacking the dense, complex and multilayered discourses of academic disciplines (Fang, Schleppegrell, &

Lukin, 2008). Rooted in systemic functional linguistics, a “framework that demonstrates how meaning is constructed in particular language choices” (p. 10), Functional Language Analysis (FLA) equips students with the tools necessary to deconstruct unfamiliar discourse patterns sentence-by-sentence, and discuss how meaning is made through linguistic choices. The FLA skills enable students to use other reading strategies thus allowing them to engage with the texts at deeper levels (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Lukin, 2008). Fang, Sheppegrell, and Moore (2014) posited that close reading and FLA allow students to “slow down the reading and focus attention to details ... process the dense information ... and enable more participation in the discussion by readers who otherwise struggle to make meaning from texts” (p. 305). FLA strategies are used to unpack three levels of meaning: (a) experiential, or content area knowledge or knowledge about the world; (b) textual, or organizational structure of the text to make it coherent; and (c) interpersonal meaning, or authors’ judgments and perspectives. Close reading and FLA help students learn how language is used to “present information, structure the text, and embed values in the core curriculum subjects” (Fang, Sheppegrell, & Moore, 2014, p. 305).

FLA code-breaking/unpacking procedures. Fang (2012, p. 107) asserted that 21st century adolescent literacy demands students to become “code breakers ... meaning makers ... text users ... and text critics. The following three-step FLA procedures allows student to develop these literacy skills (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Moore, 2014, p. 303):

1. Unpack content or experiential meaning of the text. Questions to ask about the text: “*Who does what to whom, how when and where? What is the text about?*” To address the leading questions, the following analysis strategies must be used: (a) find and mark nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns; (b) links and discuss pronouns to appropriate nouns; (c) identify and analyze each clause; and

(d) explain the relationships between parts of speech, clauses and other language features to understand the content in the text.

2. Unpack textual meaning, or text organization. Questions to ask about the text: *“How does the text weave meanings into a coherent message? How is the text organized?”* (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Moore, 2014, p. 303). To address the leading questions, the following analysis strategies must be employed: (a) “analyze what begins each clause; (b) how clauses are combined; and (c) how cohesion is created” (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Moore, 2014, p. 303).

3. Unpack interpersonal meaning or author’s perspective. Questions to ask about the text: *“How does the author infuse judgments and viewpoints? What is the author’s perspective?”* (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Moore, 2014, p. 303). To address the leading questions, the following analysis strategies must be employed: (a) analyze word choices, syntax, tone, attitudes; (b) evaluate author’s stance on the issue, and use textual evidence to support your responses.

Additional strategies to supplement FLA and close reading. Educators must differentiate and individualize instruction by adding within the context of close reading and functional analysis procedures. ELL SIFE students may need the development of alphabetic principle, phonological awareness, morphological awareness, oral language development, critical thinking skills development. To supplement effective literacy instruction, teachers must provide explicit and direct instruction of those aforementioned word-level skills in addition to text-level skills. Depending on the needs of the students, teachers may incorporate reading activities for emerging and beginning readers (i.e., reading aloud, guided reading, shared reading), word study activities (i.e., working with nouns to teach alphabet, word sorting, word hunts, word wall activities, and analytic phonics lesson), vocabulary activities (i.e., semantic web, semantic feature analysis), fluency activities (i.e., repeated reading, paired reading), comprehension activities (i.e.,

instructional conversations, Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA), reciprocal reading, What? So what? Now what?).

Conclusion

The new CCSS and the NGSS raised the bar for learning for all students by redefining what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century world. To be college and career ready, students must develop academic register proficiency in oral and written English across disciplinary domains. The standards require students to “develop increased language capacities in combination with greater content sophistication, necessitating a high level of discourse” (Hakuta, Santos, & Fang, 2013, p. 451) in classrooms across all disciplinary domains. Adolescent English language learners with gaps in formal schooling are among the most vulnerable student subgroups at risk of academic failure. To help students meaningfully engage with the more rigorous grade-level disciplinary content, and meet the increasing language demands of the Standards, educators must employ innovative strategies and approaches. Promising pedagogy on ELL SIFE academic literacy development in all disciplinary domains includes functional language analysis, and close reading strategies. Functional language analysis skills are a valuable tool for unpacking multiple levels of meaning coded in the densely packed complex disciplinary texts. This instructional strategy also allows students to learn how language is used for a variety of purposes through different textual structures of academic registers. Simultaneously, teachers must use a synergy of additional evidence-based literacy practices and approaches to individualize instruction according to ELL SIFE students’ wide range of needs, curricular goals, and particular objectives at hand. It is important, however that functional language analysis precedes other reading comprehension strategies to maximize their effectiveness and increase student engagement and motivation.

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