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The Academic Needs of the Native Spanish-Speaking English Language Learner under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Fall 2008

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

The instructional demands and pressures placed on today's educators are constantly increasing, influenced by national and state learning standards, assessments, and changing student demographics. More specifically, the standards of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) set by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) require academic gains to be made yearly by all students, including those with significant learning hurdles, such as the language acquisition difficulties faced by English Language Learners (ELLs). While the future of the NCLB Act is debatable, the necessity of effective classroom arrangements and instructional methods is indubitable. In addition, because the majority of this ELL population is made up of native Spanish speakers, a mainstream teacher's knowledge of the Spanish language proves pertinent in order to better differentiate and individualize instruction.

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THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF THE NATIVE SPANISH-SPEAKING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER UNDER THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB)

The growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States' schools has become a topic of increasing concern among educators, administrators, state and local governments, and in the world of education in general. While well-known for its diversity of ethnic groups, the United States' education system has struggled to maintain overall academic excellence with the introduction of many diverse languages through the increasing ELL population. Statistics confirm these circumstances. According to Peter Zamora (2007) of the Hispanic Education Coalition, the ELL population will likely make up a quarter of the public school students by the year 2025. As well, the current ELL population in public schools is not scoring proficiently on assessments. In the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress, only 29% of ELLs scored at or above proficiency level in reading, in contrast to the 75% of non-ELLs who were proficient. While the difficulty of improving this situation cannot be undermined, it is also key to note that one first language overwhelmingly dominates as most common among ELLs, namely Spanish. According to Zamora (2007), over three-fourths of ELLs are Spanish-speaking, and nearly half of kindergarten through twelfth grade Latino students are ELLs. In light of these statistics, this thesis will seek to present insight as to how improvements can be made in the education and particularly the language acquisition of ELLs, treating this predominance of one language as an instructional benefit. This will be presented as it relates to the following levels of the educational system: the necessity for improvements on the national and state government level, particularly in regard to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the importance of scientifically-based classroom arrangements for ELLs through the collaborative efforts of school administrators and teachers, and lastly, the day-to-day implementation of effective teaching practices necessary for fast language acquisition and success on individualized assessments under the NCLB Act. Since Spanish is the most popular primary language of ELLs, information will also be presented on specific translation and phonemic difficulties that arise when teaching English to these students. It is important to recognize the potential advantage that could be harnessed to benefit this overwhelmingly large group of Spanish-speaking ELLs by simply increasing the mainstream teacher's knowledge of this language. This paper will seek to present practical knowledge and instructional strategies based on reliable research that would strengthen the mainstream teacher pedagogically and in content knowledge in order to help ELLs master the necessary standards of learning.

Assessment Standards under the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB)

The discussion of the role of the national government in the education of ELLs cannot exclude a thorough look at the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Paraded into law by President Bush in 2002, the basic premise of this act is to create accountability for the yearly improvement of student test scores in schools nationwide, with the ultimate goal of each student reaching a level of proficiency in reading and math by 2014. Schools which do not meet these standards of improvement over time are subject to faculty and structure changes. This law is particularly problematic for ELL students, who are expected to improve their reading and math scores at often unreasonable rates while also learning the English language in which the tests are written (Khadaroo, 2008). While some allowances are made for these students, there is still a significant speed by which ELLs are expected to learn content and acquire language. Due to Section 1111 (b) (3) (C) (v) (II) of the NCLB Act, ELLs, like their non-ELL peers, are required to take the Reading/English language arts and math assessments each year from grades three through eight, as well as in high school if enrolled in specified courses. By the current 2007 to 2008 academic year, students must also take the science assessment once during the elementary years, once in middle, and once in high school (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2008). Under Titles I and III of the NCLB Act, ELLs are also required to take an English proficiency assessment, measuring comprehension, reading, writing, speaking, and listening (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2007). This assessment is taken after the first year of education in the United States (as well as in successive years), meaning ELLs are exempt from the Reading/English language arts exam during this first year.

While these assessments appear overwhelming, special considerations for ELLs must also be mentioned. Once this first year is completed, ELLs are allowed to take the Reading/English language arts assessment in their native language for up to three years. In addition, students are not limited by the national government as to how many times they can take the math and science assessments in their native language. While these exemptions are seemingly good and reasonable, it must be remembered that states can regulate this allotment and the granting of alternative tests. For example, in the state of Virginia, a Virginia Grade Level Alternative (VGLA) can be awarded to an English Language Learner or Limited English Proficiency (LEP) student as determined by a selected committee, which includes the student’s ESL instructor (or LEP instructor), the student’s mainstream teacher, and an administrator or guidance counselor knowledgeable of the student’s progress and needs (VDOE, 2008). While these exemptions are beneficial in preventing the unfair testing of ELLs, the state of Virginia does not allow any such VGLA for mathematics assessments. The exemption for the Reading/English language arts assessment, in addition, is only applicable for those of levels one or two of English proficiency and, more importantly, these exemptions cannot be given for more than three years in a row. Thus, it can be seen through Virginia’s example that ELLs often do not have more than three years before having to take the Reading/English language arts assessment (in English) and are often given even less time for the other subject area tests.

Suggestions for NCLB Improvement

While new developments continue to arise with this controversial act, changes clearly need to be made and have, in fact, already been proposed. Peter Zamora, Washington, D.C. Regional Counsel for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and Co-chair of the Hispanic Education Coalition, made several key proposals on March 23, 2007 to the House Education and Labor Committee, which will now be discussed.

One key component of the NCLB Act is assessment, particularly assessments that measure the effectiveness of a teacher’s instructional changes on student learning. Zamora (2007) proposes that the lack of effective and appropriate assessment has inhibited NCLB’s success. For ELLs, success and continued improvement in Title I assessments for content knowledge and Title III for language acquisition is key. Zamora asserts that neither states nor the U.S. Department of Education has demonstrated effective data collection to aid in improving the act. He suggests more funding on both the state and federal levels. He also suggests that the assessments be written in Spanish, the most popular first language of ELL students nationwide, in order to ensure an accurate measurement of their content knowledge. While assessments are, in fact, given in native languages on various proficiency levels, the loosening of the restrictions on the granting of VGLAs, for example, could benefit the accuracy of particularly content-area assessments, as Zamora suggests.

In connection with assessment changes, recent news about the NCLB Act has highlighted a growing discontent with the narrow method of assessment, primarily performed through standardized tests. The National Education Association (NEA), the leading teacher's union of the United States, proposes a differentiation of assessment methods, which would broaden the assessment spectrum to portfolios, observations, and performance assessments (Focus on effectiveness, 2005; Khadaroo, 2008). This broadening would assist all students in being authentically represented in their academic growth each year. Similarly, another change gaining popular support is entitled "growth models" (Khadaroo, 2008, para. 9), which measure a student's learning over the course of the year, as opposed to culminating in one intensely pressured test at the end of the year. Despite the good quality of these suggestions, recent news has suggested that changes to the NCLB Act will likely await decision and finality after the elections of this year. A fresh and optimistic perspective, however, was offered recently by Joan Wodiska, educational director of the National Governor's Association. She proposes that the controversies, complaints, and difficulties caused by the NCLB Act can be countered by an important benefit not to be ignored, namely the Act's ability to recognize those schools who are not meeting learning standards and therefore placing an expectation to see yearly growth in these schools by establishing accountability. While recent news suggests that this act may not survive its next attempt at reauthorization, this perspective provides some consolation for the teachers who have struggled to guide their students toward yearly growth (Khadaroo, 2008).

Nevertheless, however the future of the NCLB Act resolves, it is indubitable that at this present time, the necessity of teaching ELLs content and language at a rapid pace is necessary for their success in the successive grades and furthermore, their career pursuits. While this law affects the ability of ELLs to have success as measured by the U.S. Department of Education, the individual progress of ELLs is obviously more heavily affected by the format of their classroom instruction and the daily effectiveness of the teacher’s instructional methods. This points to the following exploration of the various classroom arrangements for ELL instruction and how this arrangement choice affects an ELL’s ability to attain language and content learning simultaneously.

Classroom Arrangements for ELL Instruction

As is often the case in the world of education, many theories have been proposed and tested related to the best classroom arrangement for ELLs. An overarching principle of effective classroom arrangement emerges, however, despite the variations in details of the various theories. The overarching principle claims that the development of the primary language first is essential for English language learning to effectively occur (Zamora, 2007), and that instructional practices that do not require English proficiency for content learning to occur are best. While highly theoretical and almost obvious, it holds true that the theories of classroom arrangements that adhere as closely as possible to this idea have experienced measurable success.

Principle of Dual-Immersion Programs

For example, the dual-immersion program at Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in Washington, D.C. received recognition for its success under this principle, earning the title “No Child Left Behind Act Blue Ribbon School” in 2006. This school’s success lies primarily in the emphasis of primary language learning to in fact speed second language learning. Peter Zamora states that the students at this particular school, contrary to the opinions of critics, are highly aware of the need to learn English in order to succeed in the U.S. education system, but this careful avoidance of “linguistic separatism” aids ELLs in both language and societal transitioning (Zamora, 2007, Section 4). While the classroom arrangements of the dual-immersion programs differ from school to school, the overarching principal previously mentioned of a primary language focus is adequately met here. Further exploration of other methods is needed, however, as follows.

Flooding

Linda Hoyt, a well-known author and educator in reading and language acquisition, suggests another type of classroom arrangement that requires much less language expertise of classroom teachers. This arrangement is termed “flooding” and consists of collaboration between classroom teachers and ELL experts. Instead of pulling ELLs away from their primary classroom, as is sometimes done, a “Flood Team” of ELL experts come in to the mainstream classroom for perhaps thirty minutes after a ninety minute reading instruction period. While the mainstream teacher may work with the non-ELLs in rotating groups, the “Flood team” would work with the ELLs in rereading books, reinforcing concepts and vocabulary development (Hoyt, 2002). While this classroom arrangement would ensure sufficient time in the mainstream English-speaking classroom, it is questionable as to the possible impact that can be made on ELLs' language acquisition in merely thirty minutes. As well, the ELLs with no English knowledge would fall behind in their understanding of content if left entirely in the mainstream classroom with no other type of language support. As was stated at the beginning of this section, language acquisition optimally should not result in a lack of content learning. Optimally, some content learning should occur in the primary language. While a potentially beneficial program, "flooding" is a significant move away from the optimal classroom arrangement.

Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol (SIOP)

SIOP is another classroom arrangement strategy gaining popularity and a strong research basis centers around the simultaneous learning of content and English. Among the many schools testing the effectiveness of this strategy, the Springdale School District in Arkansas employs this "partial pull-out" method for ELLs, termed Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol (SIOP) or Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE). While this method does not involve any radical language acquisition theory, Sara Ford, the principal of Springdale's Kelly Middle School believes that this arrangement simply involves "good teaching", defined as the ability of a mainstream teacher to teach both language and content to ELLs and non-ELLs without watering down instruction (Breaking the barrier, 2007). In this arrangement, students are instructed in mainstream classrooms by either a team of an ESL teacher trained in SIOP along with a content teacher or solely by a content-area teacher specially trained in sheltered instruction of math, science, social studies, and English. The classroom may or may not be solely ELLs (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). This method can be viewed as "partial pull-out" because ELLs remain with these SIOP-trained teachers until they reach a desired proficiency level. However, the difference in this strategy in comparison to others is that ELLs are not being pulled out of the mainstream classroom to learn solely English in isolation of the content material. In fact, an SIOP-structured classroom in which a trained mainstream teacher has both ELLs and non-ELLs will not differ greatly in appearance from any other stereotypical mainstream classroom. This allows for an important balance between English immersion and complete withdrawal of students from the mainstream classroom. The success of this strategy is, once again, believed to lie in effective teaching skills – to teach both language and content to ELLs and often non-ELLs in the same classroom without sacrificing meaning or depth. Through extensive workshops and continual professional development and coaching, teachers trained in SIOP are highly conscious of a student's level of English understanding and therefore also conscious of what modifications and further explanations are needed for a student to learn content-area vocabulary (Fratt, 2007). These trained teachers differentiate and individualize instruction through multimedia, group work, and an overarching strategy to allow for multiple encounters with this important content-area vocabulary. For example, fast learners may be paired with slow learners and ELLs with non-ELLs in various group work activities, providing a non-pressured environment in which ELLs can practice their English-speaking as it relates to content and, at the same time, providing an opportunity for non-ELLs to teach their ELL peers, a cognitive skill ranking high in Bloom's taxonomy. The skill of teaching requires students to think on the fifth level, entitled "Synthesis", of the six of the taxonomy, involving the synthesis and execution of an effective method of communicating ideas (Bloom, 1956). Other basic teaching strategies also employed in this Arkansas school district include having clear content and language objectives for every lesson and keeping explanations visual through pictures as opposed to merely definitions (Breaking the barrier, 2007).

Furthermore, in the Summer 2008 edition of the *Kappa Delta Pi RECORD,* Hansen-Thomas displays strong support for this recent method of classroom instruction in an extensive article entitled “Sheltered Instruction: Best Practices for ELLs in the Mainstream”. In addition to the practices exemplified in Arkansas, leading educational experts are pushing for the incorporation of the student’s first language and previous knowledge in order to individualize instruction, as well as for hands-on activities easily incorporated into math and science lessons. In fact, effective teachers often display aspects of sheltered instruction without realization through simply using math manipulatives, promoting the learning of processes over manufacturing a product, and asking critical thinking questions. What must be understood, however, is that sheltered instructional methods must be incorporated comprehensively in order to have maximum effectiveness, as opposed to selecting a few preferred methods (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). School-wide implementation and extensive staff collaboration and training of sheltered instruction methods are encouraged for optimal productivity (Hansen-Thomas, 2008).

While this strategy does employ good teaching practices, it does have criticisms. The disadvantage of this method is that students are often expected to attain language almost unconsciously through environmental conditions without any pressure or stress (Pritchard, 1996). While experiencing the language through group work and collaboration with more advanced speakers can aid fluency, it should not diminish the responsibility to be placed on the ELL to learn grammatical principles and formally develop vocabulary of the English language. While this criticism could be refuted by an SIOP teacher also incorporating key grammar principles with sheltered instruction strategies, it is a valid point that this method places a heavy emphasis on functional communication over correct grammatical structure necessary for academic reading and writing.

Natural Language Approach

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), as well as the next classroom arrangement to be explored, the Natural Language Approach, are communicative approaches based on the way individuals acquire language. The later approach, the Natural Language Approach, was first proposed in 1977 by T.D. Terrell, with the basic premise that the other language acquisition programs of the day placed an undue emphasis in grammar and pronunciation, resulting in the student's inability to converse in the target language (Terrell, 1982). This approach has gained popularity in many school districts since its inception, obviously being subject to modifications over time. This approach first allots each ELL a "silent period", in which he or she is not forced to speak English until completely ready, allowing for absorption of vocabulary and language structure by complete immersion. Students hear English, significantly beyond their own proficiency level, without speaking or responding (Pritchard, 1996). Naturally, students' listening and speaking skills far surpass their reading and writing skills, which are believed to naturally extend from these primary communication skills. The general criticism of SIOP is seen here again with the Natural Language Approach, possibly to an even stronger degree. Students in communicative approach-based classrooms can develop an advanced social vocabulary, but at the sacrifice of correct grammar and structure necessary for success in an academic environment. There is a critical difference between

Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), conducive to social settings, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), necessary for success in content learning and standardized testing (Antunez, 2002). While both are critical for ELL development, it is important not to overemphasize BICS at the expense of CALP, which will in the end serve to satisfy the requirements necessary to succeed by the NCLB Act standards.

Schema Building

This communicative approach to language learning cannot be so easily dismissed, however, considering its strong research basis, usually referred to as “schema building”. This topic is becoming popular among American educators. It was discussed by Dr. Leticia De León of the University of Texas-Pan American at the Kappa Delta Pi 2007 Convention. This language-building theory centers around the fact that humans retain information in an organized manner and that no matter how information is attained, the human mind places this knowledge, or schema, in an interconnecting “semantic network”, similar to a “diagram”. Because of this organization involved in second language development and any concept learning, there are also distinct stages of increasing complexity by which ELLs form this “semantic network” over time. The first stage is entitled “preproduction”, lasting generally for up to six months after second language exposure and is characterized by this mentioned “silent period”, during which a student absorbs information with little verbal production. The signs a student has reached “early production” are characterized by simple spoken phrases such as “car fast” and “ball move” (De León, 2007, Slide 4). These language acquisition stages mimic those of a child’s acquisition of a first language, as shown by these “toddler type” phrases. The next stage is “speech emergence”, also typically developing within the first year of second language development. Students in this stage can form sentences and understand more of what is heard, but their CALP is seriously lacking. The final stage, “Intermediate and Advanced Fluency”, is a continual stage of development in which students can express increasingly deeper thoughts and participate in meaningful conversations (De León, 2007). These stages, while seeming to occur naturally through immersion, are enhanced and complimented by effective classroom and instructional strategies. The classroom arrangement most conducive to this type of development would obviously be SIOP teaching methods, which do not unduly force the learning and speaking of the second language but instead encourage simultaneous content and language learning by validating the importance of the first language in instruction.

Nevertheless, while research supports the principles behind SIOP for language acquisition and content learning in ELLs, the overall effectiveness of any classroom arrangement highly depends on overall collaboration between teachers, language experts, and school administrators. Furthermore, as is suggested by the SIOP classroom arrangement, genuinely good teaching methods are vital for ELLs to progress in their content and language learning (Breaking the barrier, 2007). It could even be argued that an individual teacher’s methods are far more important and influential on individual student progress than the classroom or school arrangement itself. Because of this, it is useful to examine the research being conducted of specific classroom instructional strategies for the mainstream teacher of ELLs.

Specific Classroom Instructional Strategies for the Mainstream Teacher

English language instruction is obviously the primary concern of the mainstream teacher for his or her English language-learning student. Once this foundation is laid, content area learning obviously becomes more natural and proficient. Because of this, the five key areas of reading instruction as related to ELL learning will be discussed in detail: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. Each area will be explored in terms of definition and special instructional adaptations that can be made to aid ELLs in their understanding.

Five Essential Components of Reading

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate phonemes, the most basic unit of sound in language, in order to make syllables and words. In teaching phonemes, teachers must be aware of the differences between the English phonemes and those of the ELL’s first language (Antunez, 2002). For example, “ch”, a letter in the Spanish alphabet, may often be used by ELLs trying to spell the sound produced by the English consonant digraph /sh/. While it is key to make Spanish ELLs aware that “ch” is not a letter in English, the common ground between the two languages phonemically can be used to help transition a student more easily to reading in English and allow a knowledgeable teacher to quickly identify reasons behind spelling miscues. Research shows that children arrange phonemes in their minds according to those of their first language (Antunez, 2002), supporting once again the necessity to connect second language acquisition with the already-established language basis of the first. Songs, as well, often encourage development of phonemic awareness naturally through rhyme, repetition, predictability, and easy memorization. Teachers can even incorporate songs in Spanish to help students first become phonemically aware in their primary language. The sing-song pattern of “Bate, bate, chocolate, tu nariz de cacahuate” is a common Spanish rhyme that could help students understand the same concept of phonemic relations in English (Antunez, 2002, Section 1). This emphasis on the primary language reinforces the idea discussed earlier concerning proper classroom arrangements, in that connecting new concepts with their previous knowledge basis and maintaining an open relationship between the primary and secondary languages is critical for authentic learning to occur (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). A more in-depth study of phonemic differences between Spanish and English will later be explored in more depth.

Phonics

Phonics is the knowledge of the connection between phonemes and graphemes. Phonics instruction involves teaching children that there is a relationship between sounds that are heard and letters that are written and that this relationship is predictable (Antunez, 2002). Again enforcing the importance of the child’s first language, teachers should assess the students’ phonics level in their native language. Young elementary ELLs especially will not know any more in their native language than do their peers in English. Because of this, a mainstream teacher must carefully balance the emphasis to be placed on connecting instruction with the primary language. Nevertheless, the differences between what even a young ELL student has heard spoken between family members in his or her primary language and the English language heard in the classroom must be addressed in instruction. To the mainstream teacher’s benefit, the consonants of the Spanish language, the primary language of three-fourths of ELLs in the United States, are relatively similar to those of English, a similarity which can once again be used to aid students in their language transition (Zamora, 2007). Vowels may present a challenge, however. The “e” in English can have the same sound as “i” in Spanish within certain words. This could pose a challenge to ELLs in their ability to connect the vowel phonemes and graphemes of the English language or in other words, it may present spelling difficulties. This is, once again, important knowledge for mainstream teachers to be aware of in their instruction and assessment procedures. These difficulties are often evidenced in reading assessments and can be remedied by further instruction if the primary language is taken into proper consideration.

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is the foundation of reading comprehension, essential for necessary content understanding to occur. Recalling the focus of meaningful vocabulary development within the SIOP model, the consistent growth of an ELL’s vocabulary serves as a vehicle by which he or she can make significant gains in his or her understanding of the English language (Fratt, 2007). It is much easier to read a foreign language correctly, using correct pronunciation of all phonemes, than to actually understand what is being read through vocabulary knowledge. Teachers’ ability to see opportunities for vocabulary learning and their ability to teach these new meanings in a memorable way can serve as an important role in an ELL’s language acquisition. Children learn vocabulary words indirectly, as well, through conversations with adults, listening to adults read to them, and reading extensively on their own. While children in English-speaking homes are exposed to these environments frequently, ELLs often do not have these environmental influences, meaning teachers must supplement this indirect instruction with direct. For example, reading experts suggest that teachers expose children to new vocabulary words before they encounter them in their academic reading material. Teachers can also equip students to use context clues, prefix, and suffix clues (Antunez, 2002).

Vocabulary organization into three tiers. Recent research of ELL instruction has shown benefits to organizing vocabulary learning into three tiers, each level more complex than the next, allowing the opportunity for more individualized language acquisition growth (Colorado, 2007). While teachers may have varying opinions as to the specific placements of various words within the three tiers, it is clear that a general understanding of these different levels is critical in order to assess each student's vocabulary development. Tier One words can be demonstrated easily to a student by pointing to a picture or doing a simple motion, including words such as “march”, “jump”, and “dog” (Colorado, 2007, Section 1a). This group of words also includes those in which a direct translation would be sufficient (e.g. “uncle”), idiomatic expressions, cognates, and false cognates. While these various types of vocabulary will be discussed in further detail in the following section, it must be mentioned here that a teacher's knowledge and ability to translate into the student's primary language is key in helping the student grasp these Tier One words. A practical examination of vocabulary and cognate difficulties relating to the most popular language of ELLs, Spanish, will be discussed shortly. Tier Two words include more abstract concepts, such as “character” and “setting” in literary discussions, words that describe the relationship between objects, such as "between" and "by", and words that require a greater explanation for full understanding, such as "estimate", "stubborn", and "sets" in mathematics. Also included here are multiple meaning words, such as "trunk", low frequency cognates, and words appearing primarily in grade-level texts but not used in everyday conversation (Colorado, 2007, Section 2b). Finally, Tier Three words are low-frequency that often appear in upper-grade level texts. An explanation must be provided for these words, and it is once again beneficial to be able to provide this definition in the child's first language. It is suggested that a bilingual dictionary be available to students to aid in comprehension as well (Colorado, 2007). Specific word examples will be provided in a later section.

Fluency

To continue with the five essential components of reading, reading fluency involves simultaneous reading and comprehension through good expression, pace, and accuracy. While this component often develops over time with repetitious practice, guided repeated oral reading and independent silent reading are both recommended reading activities to increase reading fluency in both ELLs and non-ELLs. Teachers incorporating these specific activities provide their students the opportunity, especially in oral reading, to increase their pace while lowering miscues via teacher corrections and the pressure of their listening peers. In addition, hearing fluent reading by adults and proficient students provides a beneficial model to ELLs (Antunez, 2002). Once again, the importance of the student’s primary language in the essential reading components is reiterated by a statement from “The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement” (2002): “ELLs should learn to read initially in their first language. If this is not possible, students need to see and hear literally hundreds of books over a school year in order for fluency to be modeled to them” (Antunez, 2002, Section 4). This overwhelming volume of necessary English language exposure combined with the yearly standardized achievement tests incited by the NCLB Act can and has caused teachers anxiety and pressure in their desire to help their ELLs succeed. This is reflected in a recent Education Next/PEPG National Survey, in which 33% of public school teachers recommended that Congress make significant changes to the NCLB Act, coupled with 42% who are in favor of completely eliminating the act (Hoover Institution, 2008). Again, while the future of the NCLB Act is uncertain and its support is waning, the necessity to teach ELLs fluency of the language of the U.S. education system is indubitable. While seemingly trivial, the daily language activities of read-aloud of big books, partnered reading with more proficient students, and repeated readings are suggested here to build reading fluency in ELLs. As well, through differentiation and varying levels of difficulty of the reading material, a mainstream teacher can practically encourage the language development of ELLs while not sacrificing the growth of their non-ELLs peers (Hansen-Thomas, 2008).

Reading Comprehension

The last of the essential components is reading comprehension, which partners with the four previous components towards the ultimate purpose of reading, which is obviously to understand (Colorado, 2007). While the previous four components are essential, they cannot be thoroughly useful without incorporation into authentic texts of which students strive to comprehend. The most critical teaching strategy to aid in reading comprehension is again to engage students in a pre-text vocabulary discussion of the text. This provides students with the necessary foundation to create meaning during reading. Another essential aspect of comprehension is the importance of self-monitoring, that is, the constant awareness by the reader of the amount of text being comprehended during reading. While this does not come naturally to many readers, ELLs need additional support, as many are learning to read for the first time in a mostly unknown vocabulary. Teachers should practice modeling "listening comprehension" with the students by reading aloud and stopping when necessary to summarize main ideas (Colorado, 2007). Talking through a text aloud provides students with the necessary preparation to repeat this procedure silently. Once again, the NRC recommends exposure to comprehension of first language texts, as well, to provide a deeper understanding of how language works and its importance to any society: "To the extent possible, ELLs should have opportunities to develop literacy skills in their home language as well as in English" (Antunez, 2002, Section 5). "The extent possible" of these opportunities will, of course, vary by school, classroom arrangements, time, and faculty knowledge. As well, this idea points back to the optimal classroom learning environment for ELLs, in which content learning can occur without English proficiency being required. While SIOP exemplifies the closest model of this optimal environment, it must be remembered that this classroom arrangement, at its base, simply emphasizes "good teaching", which is essentially what the previous teaching strategies of the five essential components has stressed. These strategies can, of course, be implemented immediately without extensive SIOP training.

Cooperative Grouping

Cooperative grouping and peer pairing have become common methods of encouraging meaningful learning and character development in the elementary classroom. Grouping strategies, especially in content learning, can also serve a dual-purpose for ELLs, not only aiding in their comprehension of content, but also providing them with opportunities for increased language output. Linda Hoyt, a well-known author and researcher of language instructional strategies, cites many helpful grouping strategies in her book *Make It Real: Strategies for Success with Informational Texts* (2002). All the various grouping methods that Hoyt employs have the overarching principle of giving ELLs more opportunities to practice expressing thoughts and concepts in English, to have more language directed at them, and to provide a less stressful environment for language practice. The smaller the group size, the more speaking time the student will potentially have. Hoyt's models include "Partner Pairs" with only one other individual, "Cooperative Groups", in which each student, ELLs and non-ELLs, have a responsibility in a group assignment, and "Jigsaw Groups", in which students mingle with members of other groups to report their own group's findings (Hoyt, 2002). This latter grouping method, in particular, provides the key component of effective group work – accountability. In "Jigsaw Grouping", ELLs would be required to comprehend enough content and conversation within a group meeting to communicate with another group what was discussed in their own group. This method adds pressure to ELLs but also, in turn, takes away the pressure of having to produce a right answer. An ELL's report of their group findings to another unknowledgeable group can, in fact, be open to some personal interpretation. A similar method from another source is entitled "Numbered Heads Together", in which students are placed in groups and assigned numbers (one through four, for example). After a discussion question, the teacher randomly selects a number or group representative to talk about his or her group's response (Colorado, 2007). This again creates that essential accountability of each group member and another key component of group work for ELLs, namely the opportunity to benefit from conversing and collaborating with non-ELLs of a higher cognitive English level.

This is echoed by several sources discussing the effectiveness of SIOP, which particularly encourages the conscious pairing by the teacher of English speakers with non-English speakers (Breaking the barrier, 2007). These methods again can be placed in the category of “good teaching” and in line with the most effective of current classroom arrangements. The importance of first-language retention and connection in second-language learning, characteristic of SIOP, is also conducive to grouping strategies, particularly if there is a student who can act as a “fluent bilingual assistant” (knows both languages fluently). Roe and Ross (2006) project that translation practice involving the beginning ELL student, the bilingual student, and the mainstream teacher provides meaningful language practice and, even more importantly, the practical life skill of translation useful in today’s society.

Activities for Diverse Learning Styles

In addition to grouping strategies, Hoyt suggests various tactile and auditory teaching strategies for ELL instruction, employing modality diversification. ELLs, like their non-ELL peers, have learning style preferences. These preferences allow them to acquire language and content knowledge through multiple channels. For example, Hoyt (2002) suggests the use of "Cloze Activities" as a tactile teaching strategy in which words or parts of words in a text are covered, requiring students to predict the missing words through context clues and prior knowledge. This strategy is particularly helpful for ELLs because it gives a meaningful encounter with an English vocabulary word, often involving critical thinking before the word is uncovered, and often accompanied by a memorable picture on the elementary level.

Hoyt (2002) also suggests that teachers communicate to their students visually by making simple drawings or writing key words on the board during an oral explanation. Communication between ELLs and the mainstream teacher is often strained, limited, and frustrating for both parties depending on language development. As Pritchard (1996) suggests, ELLs and teachers can equally benefit from communication via dialogue entries or through other similar writing activities. This allows the teacher and student to have constant conversation via writing, aiding in the student's social transition, as well as providing a non-pressured assignment for transition into English language usage, particularly in BICS. While students may learn and absorb information about the English language in the classroom, they will have no outlet to practice daily conversations outside the classroom environment if their household is not English-speaking. In light of this, dialogue entries are an excellent teaching tool to ensure students are progressing schematically and gaining practice outside the classroom, even if they are not able or lack the confidence to verbalize this progress, such as with students in the "silent period" (De León, 2007). Dialogue entries can also be used to connect with auditory learners. Students who advance in their writing of conversation can then advance to auditory conversations more easily by first reading their entries and then progressing to improvisation. These teaching strategies, among a wealth of others, can be practically employed by a mainstream teacher to aid in the content and language learning of ELLs.

Connecting Linguistically with Spanish ELLs

To reiterate the necessity of a Spanish focus when speaking of ELLs in the United States, it must be restated that over three-fourths of ELLs are Spanish-speaking, and nearly half of kindergarten through twelfth grade Latino students are ELLs (Zamora, 2007). In light of this, it is important to spend a significant amount of time dealing with the grammatical and linguistic difficulties facing these students and the mainstream teacher, in order to effectively guide students’ written and oral communication skills.

Parts of Speech: Articles, Prepositions, Adjectives

First, an elementary or middle school language teacher often places a focus on parts of speech, namely their definitions, functions, and correct usage. Therefore, a brief look at the differences between the usage of several parts of speech in Spanish and English is appropriate. To begin, the usage of articles in the Spanish language is far more common in comparison with English. A teacher may encounter a sentence such as "I like the books" (Child, 1992, p. 10) in a student's writing, particularly with older students who begin learning English after already forming a literacy base in their native Spanish tongue. While the student is trying to make the general statement "I like books" (p. 10), the Spanish translation "Me gustan los libros" (p. 10) incorporates the definite article "los", meaning "the" (p. 10). An awareness of the reason behind this grammatical misinterpretation will aid teachers in their corrective instruction, in the same way as it would be essential for lower-level elementary educators to know the reason behind a phonological miscue. Similarly, the English language avoids using a definite article when referring to an undefined group, while Spanish employs a definite article to convey the same meaning. For example, the sentence “Los ricos no entienden” (Dozier & Iguina, 2008, p. 39), in which Spanish uses the definite article “los”, is translated “Rich people do not understand” (p. 39). The English translation does not refer to any definite person or group of persons, characteristic of the use of definite articles in English, but rather gives a general connotation to refer to all “rich people” (p. 39) in their entirety. Awareness of this linguistic difference can aid ELLs in their understanding of English phrasing and article usage in meaningful reading contexts, as well as communicate their ideas correctly in academic writing.

Prepositions are another part of speech that characteristically give language learners difficulties. According to Jack Child (1992), professor and researcher of translation at American University, "it has been said that the life and originality of a language is contained in its prepositions and how they are used" (p. 10). While this statement cannot be confirmed or denied, the stark differences between the prepositions of the English and Spanish languages are clear. While English employs an average of sixty-five prepositions, Spanish uses only twenty. This can cause significant problems for the ELL student, not only in choosing the appropriate English preposition in communicating an idea, but also in comprehending the directionality of these numerous prepositions in reading contexts. For example, the Spanish preposition "en" can be translated as "in", "on", or "at" (p. 10) in English, depending on context. For this reason, a mainstream teacher, especially of middle or high school ELLs, would practice "good teaching" methods by helping students understand the differences here. For example, the preposition "in" often describes the physical location of something inside another object. Words such as this preposition may be considered either a Tier One or Tier Two word (Colorado, 2007), which could be translated directly by the teacher for better understanding. A teacher, for example, might begin to explain this preposition with the Spanish word "dentro" "(Butterfield & Knight (Eds.), 2002, p. 315) to communicate the idea of an object being "inside" another object, as one would use the preposition "in" to say someone is located "inside the house" or "in the house” (p. 315). However, the word "dentro" in Spanish can have other meanings and associated colloquialisms, making this translation ineffective. For example, the Spanish phrase "dentro de lo posible" (p. 315) translates "as far as possible" and the phrase “dentro de poco” translates “shortly” or “soon” (p. 315). Direct translations are therefore often dangerous. Shown here, the word "dentro" is not even translated to remotely mean "located within" or "in" (p. 315). It is therefore better for a teacher to provide a broader base of examples to help students choose the preposition of intended meaning. While Spanish often relies on context to determine the meaning of a preposition, English writing is far more direct and specific, giving knowledge to the reader whether the book is "in", "on", or "at" (Child, 2007, p. 10) the desk, for example, without further context needed. Again, the more knowledge the mainstream teacher has of the Spanish language, the greater help he or she can be in instructing and correcting students in these situations.

Lastly, the differences in adjective usage between Spanish and English are significant. In general use, an adjective follows the noun it describes in Spanish, while it precedes the noun in English. This especially causes confusion to younger elementary students, who are often exposed to rhyming and alliteration in picture books via adjectives. Knowledgeable of this linguistic fact, mainstream teachers should make their ELLs aware of this placement difference, considering the incorporation of adjectives in state and national standards often begins in fourth grade, such as is the case in Virginia

(VDOE, VA-SOL Eng.4.8.F, 2003). With the incorporation of adjectives in standards, it follows that questions involving the ability to locate this part of speech in a reading context will appear on yearly Reading/English language arts assessments under the NCLB Act, from which ELLs are not exempted for more than three years (VDOE, 2008).

Furthermore, both the Spanish and English languages, among all languages when being learned, prove to be complex. It is wise for the mainstream teacher to begin to understand the complexities of the ELL's first language. A pertinent example here can be mentioned as related to adjectives. While it is generally true that adjectives proceed the nouns they modify in Spanish, there are some exceptions that cause a great deal of difference in translation. Child (2007) mentions several of these exceptionalities, such as "casa antigua", with the adjective following the noun, and "antigua casa" (p. 11), the inverse. The first example, "casa antigua", is characteristic of the Spanish language and can be translated "old house" (p. 11), with the adjective preceding the noun in English. The second example, "antigua casa" has an entirely different meaning, translating "former house" (p. 11) in English. The same is true of "un hombre grande", meaning "a large man", and "un gran hombre", meaning "a great man" (p. 11). This small handful of Spanish phrases, such as "antigua casa" and "un gran hombre" (p. 11), can be used as common ground between English and Spanish adjective arrangement if meanings are carefully clarified by the mainstream teacher. In this way, ELLs can optimally maintain a connection with their first language, a recommendation included in many successful classroom teaching strategies and arrangements (Antunez, 2007; Hansen-Thomas, 2008; Zamora, 2007).

Phonemic Differences Expounded

Helman (2004) highlights interesting miscues Spanish ELLs may make in their learning of the English language that serve well to introduce the importance of the next discussion: “Why is it that Spanish-speaking students learning to read in English may write “espoyo” when trying to spell a word like “spoil”? Why might a word like “sub” be written “sav” or “the”, “da”?” (p. 452). ELLs learning to “spell by sound” in English encounter difficulties when there are inconsistencies between the two languages in how phonemes are represented by graphemes. The importance for a mainstream teacher, especially on the elementary level, to provide a solid foundation of alphabetic writing and spelling is indubitable. Helman (2004) states, “Alphabetic writing builds a foundation for the development of more complex levels of reading and writing, which is a primary mission of schooling” (p. 453). With this in mind, a brief look at the commonalities and distinctions between English and Spanish phonemes is pertinent for the benefit of the mainstream educator.

Many consonant sounds and blends exist in both English and Spanish. These include the consonant sounds *p, b, t, d, k, g, m, n, f, s, w, y, ch, and l,* as well as the consonant blends *pl, pr, bl, br, tr, dr, cl, cr, gl, gr, fl,* and *fr* (p. 453). This gives a Spanish ELL the ability to pronounce the word “green”, in the same way “gris” (translated “gray” in English) would be pronounced in Spanish. This common ground, once recognized, will aid ELLs in “spelling by sound” (p. 453), which is a gateway for connecting correctly spelled words with their contextual meanings.

Despite the commonalities, several consonant sounds unique to the English language can be expected to cause ELLs spelling and pronunciation difficulties. Because students schematically organize new phonemes according to the phonemes of their own first language (Antunez, 2002), they must be taught these unique English phonemes in light of their lacking Spanish context. For example, the unique English sound /v/ as in “van” (Helman, 2004, p. 454) may be pronounced “ban” by ELLs, due to the subtle /b/ sound used in Spanish for the grapheme “v” (p. 454). As well, while both languages contain the letter “z”, it is pronounced as a /s/ in Spanish-speaking Latin-American countries and /th/ in Spain. ELLs may therefore pronounce “zipper” as “sipper” (p. 454). Similarly, the unique English sound /j/ as pronounced in “jump” (p. 454) does not exist in Spanish. When ELLs hear /j/, they may attempt to represent it by the grapheme “ch”, as in “chump” (p. 454), the closest Spanish phoneme to the English /j/. Remediation for these spelling miscues involves first validating the student’s mistakes as logically based on the first language. For example, if a student writes “da” for the English word “the”, the teacher should acknowledge the absence of /th/ in Spanish and aid ELLs in pronouncing the sound and representing it by the grapheme “th” (p. 454). As well, the effective teacher should model “thinking aloud” (p. 458) through pronunciation and self-correction of problematic words. While correctly spelling what is heard is only one step towards English fluency, students who are able to connect what is heard with an actual English word are also likely to recognize that same word in a meaningful reading context (Antunez, 2002).

Similarly, the Spanish language does not use consonant blends beginning with “s” at the beginning of words, such as *st, sp, sc, sm, sl, sn, sw, spl, spr, str,* and *squ.* English words that begin with these blends are often similar to Spanish words that begin with “e”, such as the English “spirit” for the Spanish “espíritu” (Helman, 2004, p. 454) or the

English “structure” for the Spanish “estructura”(p. 454). This difference could be seen in spelling miscues among Spanish ELLs, who may represent these blends with this additional “e” (p. 454). There are also distinctions in how words can be ended in Spanish and English. While most consonant sounds, excluding /h/, can end words in English, Spanish words can only be ended by the sounds /l/, /r/, /d/, /n/, and /s/. As a result, English words ending with a closed syllable, or consonant phoneme, may be only pronounced partially by ELLs unfamiliar with these ending sounds. A student may say “har” for “hard” or “tos” for “toast” (Baer & Dow, 2007, p. 19; Helman, 2004, p. 458). While these linguistic differences and difficulties are seemingly trivial for the mainstream teacher, Helman (2004) states, “These examples show us that the more that teachers know about students’ home languages, the more the specific errors of the students can tell us” (p. 457). Considering the importance educators place on being a “reflective practitioner”, meaning adjusting instruction based on the progress and knowledge of students, this perspective validates the necessity for the mainstream teacher to build this knowledge of the Spanish language in light of the demographics of the U.S. ELL population.

Lastly, the distinctions between vowel usage in Spanish and English are worthy of mention. While each vowel grapheme in Spanish has only one vowel phoneme, the English language has approximately nineteen vowel phonemes (Baer & Dow, 2007). Spanish lacks the four short vowel sounds of the letters “a”, “e”, “i”, and “u” in English, as well as r-controlled vowels, the “schwa” sound, and the vowel sounds heard in “could” or “caught” (Helman, 2004, p. 455). While this difference is overwhelming for ELLs and causes many mispronunciations, good instructional methods can reduce this anxiety.

While obvious, teachers should move their instruction in stages, such as focusing on mastery of the short-vowel sounds before moving to the long vowels. In the same way for consonants, a teacher should focus on the common consonant sounds before pointing out the distinctions, preferably beginning with the phonemes /m/, /s/, /l/, /f/, and /p/. In general, by knowledgeable correction and providing a low-anxiety learning environment, a mainstream teacher can lead ELLs to connect correct oral pronunciation with written language as "they become proficient speakers, readers, and writers in a new language" (p. 459).

Conclusion

To conclude, through a leveled look at factors affecting the language acquisition and content learning of ELLs – from the national and state level assessments, to the classroom arrangement methods within a school or district, to the instructional methods of individual teachers – one can see a direct correlation between this increasing level of specificity and the increasing importance to the individual ELL student's progress and academic success. While the national and state standards serve to guide and sometimes restrict curricular decisions, a mainstream teacher's content and pedagogical knowledge are critical in helping ELLs acquire language and content learning simultaneously. Often called "good teaching" under SIOP, a teacher demonstrating these strategies focuses on cooperative grouping, meaningful encounters with vocabulary in reading contexts, making linguistic connections with the primary language, and providing a low-anxiety environment for both BICS and CALP-related language practice. A teacher's ability to connect with the student's first language, as well, provides an additional benefit to the ELL student, in that he or she is able to receive meaningful corrections that are often made based on first language knowledge. Looking to the future, there is an ever-increasing need for teachers who can bring academic success to diverse classrooms, including students not only of language diversities but also of varying SES and disability backgrounds. The standards of the NCLB Act demand constant progress and improvement, which should play out in daily classroom instructional changes, characterized by the vague, but now better understood term, genuine “good teaching.”

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