

Determining classroom placement for first year English Language Learner students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores classroom placement for first year English Language Learner (ELL) students from the perspective of a dual language director and two bilingual education strategists. The study strives to interrogate classroom placement for first year ELL students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level. Through a process of coding data from interviews with the two bilingual strategists and the dual language coordinator, several significant themes emerged. These included the need for educators to: have the knowledge of full English immersion strategies, keep a balanced approach in the classroom, be aware of student frustration, understand code switching, and take advantage of professional development. The findings from this study will help school districts and administrators consider classroom placement options for first year ELL students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level.

Key Words: ELL, Sheltered Instruction, full English immersion

INTRODUCTION

In the United States different programs are implemented to teach English to English Language Learner (ELL) students. Shorr (2006) explained that teachers of the Bilingual Academy in New York City shared that they use three different tracks to teach English to ELL students. They have a dual language program, a bilingual program, and English as a Second Language (ESL) program. For example, in Hawaii, a teacher uses drama to teach English to ELL students. In Wisconsin, one of the most effective programs that they have is to pair senior citizens with recent immigrant students.

Marian (2013) conducted a quantitative study to compare the effectiveness of bilingual two-way immersion programs. The programs compared included a two-way immersion Spanish native transitional program of instruction, as well as, a two-way English immersion mainstream classroom. The results of the study indicated that the two-way immersion program benefitted both minority and majority elementary students. In addition, Macias (2013) conducted another study in a school district close to the border. The study focused on teaching English Language Arts in Spanish to recent immigrant students whose language proficiency level was at beginning and intermediate levels. The study sought to determine whether students taught in English had greater academic gains in the Standard English Language Proficiency (SELP) test than students taught English Language Arts in Spanish. Macias (2013) stated that follow up t-tests and multiple regression analysis suggested that less Spanish used in the classroom accounted for higher SELP scores. Since the number of ELL students continues to grow in the United States, and accountability standards continue to make educators responsible for the success of ELL students, school districts need to ensure that the best programs and strategies are available for teachers to teach English to ELL students. Pascopella (2011) explained that successful school districts that meet all components of accountability use different programs to teach English to ELL students. Some of the programs used by successful school districts are Newcomers Academy, Sheltered Instruction, and Dual Language programs. All programs need support in order to be implemented effectively. Staff development must be provided to support and guide teachers during the year. A diverse array and different bilingual programs are needed to ensure that all ELL students learn English and graduate from high school with the English language skills necessary to become successful students in a college or university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The number of immigrant students in the United States has more than tripled since 1970 (Shorr, 2006). Teaching immigrants or English Language Learner (ELL) students is a challenge in most states. Shorr (2006) stated that in a school district in Arizona, teachers explained that students must learn English as fast as they can since they have to be mainstreamed after a year in a structured English immersion classroom. In 2000, the state of Arizona passed Proposition 203 English for the children, effectively doing away with bilingual education and replacing it with sheltered English immersion. Proposition 203 has affected language use by minority students in the classroom (Johnson, 2012). Varela (2010) speaks about mainstreaming ELL students into regular classes with their English peers. He explains that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) puts pressure on educators and students since NCLB expect all students to make academic progress. In addition, he explains that most states in the United States provide sheltered instruction to ELL students. He explains that sheltered instruction makes academic language comprehensible while students develop English proficiency.

Pascopeella (2011) sought to explore different Bilingual education models used by school districts across the nation to teach English Language Learner (ELL) students. The main theme that emerged was that successful school districts use a combination of Bilingual education programs to teach English to ELL students. Some of the programs are Newcomer's Academy, Sheltered English Instruction, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Dual Language Programs, and Structured English Immersion. In addition, Fritzen (2011) conducted a study in three high school social studies classrooms. The study consisted of classroom observations and interviews about pedagogical practices intended to help ELL students to improve their academic content knowledge and English proficiency. The study demonstrated that teachers used basic components of sheltered instruction, but the nature of the instruction in each classroom took students into different learning pathways. A key component to ensure that any program is implemented effectively is staff development.

Short (2013) offered guidelines to provide effective staff development to teachers about shelter instruction observation protocol (SIOP). He recommended providing ongoing staff development and support for implementation. Instructional coaches and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could be support to teachers to implement SIOP lessons in their classrooms. Teachers need to become familiar with the content they teach, academic language, student's language proficiency levels, and backgrounds. Finally, the author explained that administrators must be involved or trained to ensure an effective implementation of SIOP. Short (2012)

conducted a study about the development of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). During the experimental study researchers compared two school districts with similar demographics and socioeconomic status. The study was conducted over two years and compared scores in a content area and English as a second language classes. The results indicated that the SIOP model offered a promising approach in regard to staff development to help teachers improve the quality of instruction offered to ELL students.

Therefore, offering effective staff development to teachers will make a difference in regard to the implementation of any program. To implement SIOP effectively teachers must be provided with ongoing and supportive staff development.

Maxwell (2012) explained a bill that was proposed to the state legislators in California to unmask ELL students who are not making adequate academic progress. These students are identified as long term ELLs. Students considered long term ELLs are students who get stuck on intermediate level two years in a row according to assessments used to measure English language proficiency. Some educators see ELL students as students who cause trouble or more work for teachers. Ferlazzo (2012) sought to explain that we should see ELL students through a lens focused on assets. Some of the themes that emerged from his study were helping people recognize their strengths and learn new skills to improve their lives to help ELL students find their strengths as readers. Ferlazzo gives classroom examples and describes specific inductive teaching strategies and techniques he uses with his mostly new-immigrant student population to outline these five steps: Build strong relationships with students; access prior knowledge through stories; help students learn by doing; identify and mentor students' leadership potential; and promote the habit of reflection. In addition to these strategies teacher may use other strategies to reach ELL students. Bolos (2012) explained that a strategy that could be used to reach ELL students is read aloud. Students may benefit from read-aloud, a strategy that is implemented with elementary students. The author clearly stated that the purpose of read-aloud is to model reading

fluency and comprehension skills for students. Two other themes revealed that students will benefit from comprehension strategies and vocabulary enrichment. Restrepo (2013) evaluated the efficacy of Spanish – English versus English-only vocabulary intervention for dual language learners with language impairment compared to mathematics intervention groups and developed groups with no intervention. Since students do not know the English language, they will not understand the academic or content language that is used in mathematics. Moore-Harris (2005) explained the challenges and strategies to teach mathematics to English Language Learner (ELL) students. Some of the challenges of teaching mathematics to ELL students are that students need to learn a new culture, measuring system, and academic content language. Some of the strategies recommended for the author are to create consistent classroom routines, use consistent format for quizzes and assignments, and teach mathematics vocabulary and structures daily. In addition, Restrepo (2013) explained that other themes that emerged from his study the realization that bilingual vocabulary intervention facilitated receptive and expressive vocabulary gains in dual language learners with language impairment compared to the English vocabulary intervention, mathematics intervention and no intervention groups.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In 2000, one out of five children in the U.S was born abroad - 10 million students, and seven million children are U.S born from foreign-born parents. The foreign population has tripled since 1970 changing the composition of our classrooms (Shorr, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education and Statistics (2010), in 2008 there were approximately 10.9 million children in the United States who did not speak English in their homes (Bolos, 2012). Research indicates that our English Language Learner (ELL) students are struggling in the classroom due to not having enough time to develop academic language. Varela (2010) explained that

the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) placed a new focus and accountability on the achievement levels of English learners by requiring that they develop English proficiency and meet the same academic standards that all children are expected to meet by the year 2014. This means that in some cases students have out of ELL programs after one or two years. Rapid mainstreaming seems to ignore what research tells us: it takes five to seven years or more years for students to develop the academic language needed to survive in grade-level classes.

However, a more recent research study indicates that ELL students are not provided enough support to learn English. Short (2012) explained that in many content classes no accommodation is made for the specific language development needs of ELL students. This lack of accommodation raises a significant barrier to success, because ELL students are expected to achieve high academic standards in English. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by examination of perceptions of two bilingual education strategists and a dual language coordinator.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of a dual language director and two bilingual strategists in regard to classroom placement for first year English Language Learner students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level. The information collected from this study will provide the school district data to determine if full English

immersion is the best placement for ELL students whose language proficiency level is beginning and first year to the U.S. Based on the data collected the school district will set systems in place to schedule ELL students into classes that will help them succeed in school and state assessments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research for this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the views of the dual language coordinator and the two bilingual strategists in regard to classroom placement for first year ELL students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level?
2. What factors contribute to low student performance for first year English Language Learners students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level?

METHODOLOGY

Our objective in this study was not only to share the voices of the dual language director and two ELL strategists in their own words and through their stories of working with ELL students. Patton (2002) states that a qualitative design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to allow the exploration of whatever the topic under study offers to inquiry.

Research Design and Sampling Strategy

The research design and sampling strategy was to select three ELL educators who work with ELL students daily. In this case, the dual language coordinator and two ELL strategists were selected purposively for this study. Purposive and directed sampling through human participation increases the range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher's ability to identify emergent themes that take adequate account of the conditions and cultural norms (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Role of the Researcher

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument. Qualitative researchers gather data themselves by examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2014). To get to relevant matters of human activity the researcher must be involved through the research process. The researcher must verify that the research process is not influenced by biases that do not inhibit the flow of pertinent information (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). In this study the lead researcher has spent fifteen years in education. He has spent seven years as classroom teacher, seven years as a campus administrator, and one year as high school math coordinator. Due to the relationships the lead researcher has with the study informants, he was afforded many "insider" opportunities to not only observe but also to interact closely and frequently, often getting "inside the head and hearts" of the leadership within this district (see Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, on the value of insider research). Thus, we acknowledge that the insider observations of the lead researcher within the district informs this study.

Data process

The process to analyze data started with the first interview and continued through the second and third interview. Bernard (2002) explained that there are three different types of interviews; unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and high forward interactions with respondents. For our study, we decided to utilize semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interview the researcher uses an interview guide with list of questions and topics that seek to get the informant talking. The interviews with all three participants were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed responses were placed in an excel spreadsheet to code them and look for common themes and emergent data.

Trustworthiness and credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the conventional criteria to establish trustworthiness are validity, eternal validity, reliability and objectivity. By conducting three interviews with three different staff members in education, we established validity and objectivity which are components to establish trustworthiness and credibility. We analyzed the data collected during the interviews by using Saldana 's (2013) coding strategies. He explained that in qualitative data analysis a code is a researcher generated symbol to organize data to analyze later or categorize as a theme. During the data analyzes with the dual language coordinator and the ELL strategists, we found that some of the responses were similar even though they had different years of experience working with ELL students. Having common responses lead to common themes. Theming of the data across responses contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collected. Prolonged engagement of the researcher with the researched also contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

Results of the informant data in this study revealed several themed perspectives of the classroom placement for first year ELL students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level. Prior to sharing the results of the study, some background about the participants is provided.

Participants

In order to protect the identities of the participants on this study, the researcher has not used participant names. Instead the researcher labeled the responses as the first, second, and third participant. The first participant is an ELL strategist that has been in education for 21 years. Sixteen years as a classroom teacher teaching ELL students and five years as an ELL strategist. The second participant is an ELL strategist too and has eight years of experience as an English Language Arts teacher, and one year as an ELL strategist. The third participant is a dual language coordinator who has been in education for 15 years and 9 of those years have been in the classroom. These three participants work in a school district that has four comprehensive high schools, one STEM high school, and four multipurpose campuses. Overall, participants are responsible to provide support to teachers and ELL students at nine different campuses.

FINDINGS

The process of data analysis involved coding interview responses from the participants. This process allowed several themes to emerge from the interviews conducted to the dual language coordinator and the two ELL strategists. The emergent themes included the need for educators to: have knowledge of full English immersion strategies, keep a balanced approach in the classroom, be aware of student frustration, understand code switching, and take advantage of professional development.

Full English immersion knowledge

The first question that was asked to each participant was whether they were familiar with full English immersion. The first participant mentioned the following about full English immersion for ELL students or recent immigrant students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level:

Yes, I am familiar with full immersion for recent immigrants. We do kind of do that now in Algebra 1. The reality is that we did do dual language in the past, but there was a decision in the district to move all students to full English immersion in Algebra 1. I still think that we need to work a little bit on that because we have kids in our high school of 750 ELL students who need a lot of native language support. But, we also we also have to look that we cannot be black and white about things. Because with dual language we teach the curriculum 100 percent in Spanish and that is very important to support their native language, but they also need some support for the language on the test. So, I think that we need to be very aware what the performance descriptors say and how we support our ELLs. We probably need some work in that area. We don't have it right yet.

The second participant said the following about full English immersion:

I am a little bit familiar with the full English immersion for recent immigrants. I know that this year the district decided to do away with dual language classes for recent immigrants and scheduled these students into full English immersion classes. In my opinion, I would describe the program as when a recent immigrant student is placed in all English content courses and does not receive any linguistic support in their native language.

Finally, the third participant stated,

My experience with full English immersion as an administrator is that it has proven to be way less effective than dual language instruction when teachers deliver instruction in the English language to recent immigrants. Actually, the more you do English immersion the more you prove that the dual language program works because they generate more comparison groups to compare with. The problem is how many students have been academically sacrificed during the process.

Although all three participants were interviewed on different days and times all three participants admitted to being familiar with full English immersions, and two of the participants agreed that additional support is necessary in order for ELL students to achieve success in the classroom. The third participant mentioned that dual language instruction is more effective than full English immersion in their perspective.

Keeping a balanced approach

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was that educators must keep a balanced approach in regard to the language development for recent immigrant ELL students. For example, the first participant stated:

In ESL language development there is kind like a pendulum that shifts. We are almost extremists in language. You cannot really speak about extremes in language. You have to talk case by case scenarios. In addition, she said that we cannot be so radical. It has to be 100 percent in English now but then 100 percent in Spanish with no support in the language that they are going to be tested.

The second participant mentioned some of the factors that limit recent immigrants' acquisition of the second language. Therefore, a balance approach must be considered to ensure language acquisition and student success. For example, he said:

I strongly believe that if students come with a strong background from their country then the transition to English should be easy. For those who do not come with a strong background, they will struggle with language and content.

The third participant mentioned the following about keeping a balanced approach:

It is the first year that we prohibited dual language because we have been doing English immersion for many years, we have been doing English immersion for many of our students and that is why we have such an amazing poor performance.

A balanced approach was the common theme that emerged from all three participants. The first participant stated that when we speak about language we cannot be so radical while the second participant stated that we must consider the student's academic background. Finally, the third participant stated that a radical change was made by the school district by changing radically from one year to the next one back and forth between dual language instruction and full English immersion.

Student frustration

While considering the themes that emerged from interviewing the three participants with regard to student frustration. We coded participants' responses such that when we thematized the themes that emerged from the interviews, these themes reflected student needs in regard to learning a new language. For example, the first participant stated:

It is necessary for these students to acquire the academic vocabulary in English. On the other hand, I imagine that full immersion also frustrates students because they want to learn, however their inability to learn the language may cause them to give up.

The third participant stated:

When we use traditional models of instruction, these traditional models such as full English immersion included perceive the first language as a problem. A problem to be remediated and they attempt to subtract the first language. The problem with those models is that they directly impact the content learning process. Again, because the students are placed in a double jeopardy learning content and language simultaneously increasing frustration, and of course academic underperformance. Therefore, when ELL students participate in instructional programs that support and validate their first language not only they feel more comfortable, but their academic achievement significantly increases.

Code switching

As educators and researchers, we know that teachers go above and beyond to help students succeed academically and in this case to acquire a new language. The next theme that emerged from the interviews was code switching. The first participant stated:

When I go into the classrooms, I am always telling the teachers, hey, stay in your lane. What I mean by that is no code switching. So stay in the language of instruction if you are teaching in English stay in English if you are teaching in Spanish stay in Spanish. Do not switch the two languages. But in reality, I understand why they code switch. I get it. I know why. There is nobody who went in to education to get rich. They are trying to get the kids to understand content. They are trying to get the kids to understand.

The second participant also acknowledges code switching when he said:

I have walked into several classrooms where teachers are trying their best to explain the content to recent immigrant students. They explain the content in English and they explain the same content again in Spanish.

In addition, the third participant acknowledges code switching when he said:

Technically what the teacher is trying to do is to scaffold the learning by repeating the instruction is Spanish but to do that he is sacrificing time. If he had to teach 10 things today but he is repeating he will only have time to teach five so simultaneous translations is an instructional practice that has been proven ineffective. Especially, because of the lack of time the students disconnect when the instruction is delivered in the second language and they will wait for the translation so technically you are using half of the time that you have in class to instruct your native English speakers and therefore the other half of the time to instruct your native English speakers so instead of having a 90 minutes class you have two 45 minute classes.

The three participants acknowledged to have seen code switching in the classroom and teachers trying their best to deliver instruction to ELL students. According to Johnson (2014), if we want students to learn, the most critical element is the teacher. So professional development is the overall most important thing we can do to help students learn.

Professional Development

The last theme that emerged from interviewing all three participants was staff development. For example, the first participant said:

At this point, we are not providing staff development as we should. We do English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) training district wide, and we have done some limited sheltered instruction training. But sheltered instruction just for algebra because remember every environment is different every kid is different. We need to look at the language within the content and really put apart that class, and train teacher teaching that class. I don't think we are there yet. It will be good if we could get there yet. We will make a difference on those kids.

The second participant also admitted that not enough staff development has been provided to teachers. He stated:

We provide staff development to all core content teachers. We provide staff development to teachers about the ELPS.

The third participant did not provide an answer or his opinion in regard to staff development. However, the first and second participant the ELL strategists both agree that not enough staff development has been provided to teachers teaching ELL students or recent immigrant students.

DISCUSSION

Data analysis in this study revealed varied perspectives among the participants interviewed. The conversation with the informants revealed that as educators, we must consider classroom placement for first year ELL students whose language proficiency level is at beginning level to ensure a smooth transition to full English immersion classes and academic success. One ELL strategist was very frank about the looming crisis and said:

Recent immigrants are not our biggest issue here. They are not. I am sorry to say. The real issue is relative to the long term ELLs. So, we really need to take the bull by the horns or else we are going to be in trouble.

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