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Preparing Secondary Teachers for Common Core Instruction with Long-Term English Learners

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the need for equitable pedagogies for English Learners (ELs) through common core subject area content (materials and instruction), process (activities), and products (assessments). It compares instruction for secondary Long-term English learners (LTELs) in the past to what is effective and equitable for them in the present. The authors examined lesson plans from 35 single subject credential teacher candidates in southern California who conducted clinical practice, and thus wrote lesson plans in districts that served LTEL students. An analysis indicated that candidates’ lessons included content, process and product strategies that represent equitable pedagogies. Lesson analysis led to a five part equitable pedagogical plan: 1) information about student, 2) strategy, 3) explanation of strategy alignment to the student’s need, 4) assessment criteria, and 5) monitoring and adaptations. Educating Long-term English learners is more than just providing access to the curriculum or sheltering instruction.

*Keywords:* common core, differentiation, English learners, equitable pedagogy, long-term English learners, secondary education, single subject credential, universal design for learning

**Preparing Secondary Teachers for Common Core Instruction with English Learners**

At the secondary level, the majority of English learners (ELs) can be characterized as “long term English learners” (LTELs), having been enrolled in U.S. schools for approximately 6 years or more; with a grade point average below a 2.0; and insufficient linguistic and academic proficiency to succeed in content areas (Olsen, 2010). Secondary ELs have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in school that require a varied level of scaffolding to access content (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010).

**Common Core Standards – New Standards, New Opportunities**

As teachers begin to incorporate rigorous Common Core Standards, there is fear that ELs will continue to further decline in academic achievement, since EL instruction requires understanding of knowledge in disciplines that entail high functioning levels of English (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012). According to WestEd “in order to succeed academically, all ELs must overcome a ‘double gap,’ first to equal the achievement of their native-speaking counterparts, and then to reach a level of achievement that is considered grade-level proficient” (p. 3, Walki, et al., 2010). CCSS and the new ELD Standards can offer a window of optimism to reconstruct the manner in which teachers instruct ELs and provide pathways into college and career readiness.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the need for educators to take more ownership for EL’s mastery of English and to identify the parts of an effective content, process and product differentiation in a lesson.

**Literature Review**

**Then and Now**

Forty years ago, teachers used the audio-lingual method as systematic grammatical drills in lessons designed to capitalize on repetition and memorization (Nosrati et al., 2013). Students had little control over their own language production and only received feedback on their recitations of sentence patterns and dialogues (Brooks, 1964). Strong criticism rejected this inductive model and favored communicative approaches to learning language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Lesson design included practicing meaningful language with the teacher as a facilitator with less talking and more listening during instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). This led to the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) that stressed similarities in acquisition between the first and second language. Lessons were designed by lowering students’ affective filters and providing instruction in a comprehensible manner.

Years later, language proficiency was still defined as “how long it takes language minority students to acquire sufficient English proficiency to follow instruction in the regular classroom” (Cummins, p. 5 in Leyba 1994). The assumption was that their language competence was deficient, leading to compensatory programs with quick-exit transitional bilingual education in the early grades (Crawford, 1995). Consequently, secondary education included the practice of tracking ELs based on their linguistic and academic levels with a sink and swim approach - English immersion (Crawford, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Also, English as a Second Language (ESL) was considered a remedial curriculum across grade levels (Cummins, 1994; Gensuk, 2011).

Late exit bilingual models through 6th grade began to emerge, however secondary education remained status quo until Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) or sheltered instruction was introduced as an approach for academic content in English (e.g., social studies, science), hence, lessons defined content and language objectives for cognitively demanding subjects (California Department of Education, 1993; Echevarria & Graves, 2007; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008).

Although, we are currently implementing programs that capitalize on the students’ linguistic and cultural diversity in K-8th grades (e.g., dual language) (Lindholm-Leary, 2001), experts are still defining what these programs look like in secondary education. In the meantime, the California’s English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (2014) defines designated and integrated English Language Development as approaches for English learners, but the topic remains under much discussion for lesson planning across all grade levels.

Despite 40 years of frameworks, programs, approaches and techniques to teach English learners, the majority of secondary schools still fall short in providing adequate instruction to ELs. Lesson design is still unclear for teachers, particularly mainstream content teachers of LTELs (Olsen, 2010).

**Common Core and English Learners**

Educators need to understand that educating ELs is more than just providing access to sheltered instruction. New CCSS call for students who are actively engaged in content learning through peer interactions, research, complex texts, and advanced levels of academic language. Textual evidence and the complexity of academic language in content registers present instructional challenges for ELs (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2012; Daoud, 2015; TESOL, 2013). Therefore, a transformation of the manner in which teachers/teacher candidates design lessons will be the new guiding principle for equitable pedagogies for ELs (Daoud, 2015).

The CA ELA/ELD Framework (2014) is the first document to incorporate the needs of ELs in content instruction, PreK-12th grades. The framework provides a blueprint for the implementation of two sets of interrelated standards: CA Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (2012), and the CA English Language Development Standards (2012). These standards are designed to be used in tandem with all other subjects and across all domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

California has the largest number of ELs in the country. More than 20% of the students in grades K-12 are designated as ELs with more than 60 languages represented (CDE Dataquest, 2014). More than 45%, not all of them ELs come from homes where a language other than, or in addition to, English is spoken. Therefore, it is crucial that equitable pedagogies match the ELs’ abilities and engage students in the curriculum (Daoud, 2015; ELA/ELD Framework, 2014). All educators must know and share the responsibility for teaching ELs (TESOL, 2013). Coleman and Goldenberg (2012) stated that what happens in the classroom and how teachers teach has tremendous consequences on the academic achievement of ELs, because “ELLs have the challenge of learning academic content and oral and written language skills and conventions simultaneously” (p. 47). Language can best be understood as action, rather than “form” or “function” alone; students learn to do things with language when they are engaged in meaningful activities that engage and challenge them (Bunch et al., 2012).

**Lesson Design for English Learners**

For this paper, the authors examined lesson plans from 35 single subject teacher credential candidates designed during the 2013-14 academic year. The candidates were enrolled in Multilingual Education, which focused on the goals of how to support ELs. The assignment for this paper was to design a lesson plan that included differentiation for ELs. The program provided a lesson template for all courses and clinical practice. Each lesson included: standards, objectives, assessments, enduring understanding, essential questions, instructional steps, student information, differentiation and materials. Prior to this assignment, candidates created a universally designed lesson (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Rose & Gravel, 2010) using backward planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) with specific differentiation for content, process or product (Tomlinson, 2001) based on their class profile. Candidates located student information at their clinical practice sites, such as English proficiency levels and individual education plans. Currently, the data available for ELs is the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). The CELDT scores identify the ELs’ ability to listen, speak, read and write in English. Candidates matched a student’s CELDT score to an appropriate CA ELD Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs): emerging, expanding or bridging. They created and conducted a survey with their secondary students to identify their interests and learning profiles. Finally, the candidates analyzed the profiles to identify similarities in their students’ learning, and select differentiation strategies.

**Content**

The candidates’ lessons included 23 universal designs for learning content with eight strategies, including an explanation of how the content was specifically designed for ELs. In addition, four of the lessons included content differentiation based on ELs’ readiness – language proficiency. The content differentiation consisted of content accommodations with no content modifications - no substantial change to the instructional level, subject content or assessment criteria for the EL, but addressed the delivery method.

**Process**

The lessons designed by the candidates included 27 process strategies, with 74% (26) universal design for learning strategies, including 21 of these with descriptions of how the strategy was designed for ELs. The process included flexible grouping (21), graphic organizers (7), and multisensory activities (6). The grouping strategies described the different ways students can be grouped to maximize learning, with 76% (16) specified for ELs, such as grouping the ELs with students more proficient in English to model correct language or to partner with other ELs that share the same first language for cross-linguistic references. The lessons with graphic organizers were designed for scaffolding and visual content processing. All of the graphic organizers represented universal design, only four of the lessons described the criteria for assessing the ELs’ graphic organizers and five of the lessons described how the ELs would be monitored while working. Multisensory activities included presentations (3), drawing (2) and acting (1).

**Product**

Six of the candidates’ lessons included product strategies (17%); five candidates included a rubric and one candidate designed a math lesson where the EL student verbally answered using a complete sentence in English. Two of the lessons used the rubrics as a universally designed product, but the other three were differentiated and specified how the ELs would be required to perform at different levels based on their readiness. The product differentiations demonstrated minor accommodations for ELs in same subject area content as the rest of the class. The rubrics were designed to communicate different language development tasks based on the PLDs: emerging, expanding and bridging.

**Equitable Pedagogical Plan**

After analyzing the lessons for equitable pedagogies, we identified five different components in the plans:

1. Identification of EL’s PLD, learning profile and/or interests
2. Strategy aligned to the EL’s PLD, learning profile and/or interests Explanation of why the strategy is appropriate for the EL’s PLD, learning profile and/or interests
3. Assessment criteria for monitoring the EL’s progress based on the PLDs
4. Monitoring and adapting the strategy to support EL’s progress.

In general, the candidates were consistent with information about their students’ English PLDs, learning profiles and interests, and selected equitable pedagogies for their identified students. First, 97% of the candidates (n=34/35) provided descriptive data about their students’ PLDs, learning profiles and interests as evidenced by the candidates’ mindful reflections of who needed support in their lesson. Second, 100% of the candidates (n=35) provided at least one equitable strategy that was aligned to the student. Third, 60% of the candidates (n=4) provided an explanation for the plan. Some candidates may have assumed that the strategy was well aligned, therefore, not providing an explanation. Fourth, 60% of the candidates (n=4) that used product strategies described the criteria for assessing the student’s progress. Fifth, monitoring and adaption was described in 50% of the strategies.

**Conclusions and Educational Significance**

Across all content areas, teacher candidates’ lessons were aligned to both the CCSS and the California ELD Standards. The lessons contained objectives and assessments that allowed LTELs enrolled in the classes to access the content, as well as targeted language objectives. Teacher candidates used 73 universal and differentiated strategies in the 35 lessons and allowed ELs to equitably access skills and knowledge in content classes as outlined in the CCSS.

The importance of this study is that teacher preparation programs must be clear on how to teach equitable pedagogical strategies in content area lesson designs for students who are linguistically, culturally and educationally diverse. In comparison to lesson development during the last decades that lacked focus for ELs in secondary education, this research advances instructional practices for a transformative education and agency in designing lessons that are in accordance to the proficiency and academic levels of ELs/LTELs. More research is needed in the instruction of LTELs, particularly on teacher credential programs in higher education. Teacher candidates in secondary education programs are likely to have LTELs enrolled in their content area classes. By teaching candidates how to develop universally designed and differentiated CCSS lessons that are targeted to match their ELs’ needs, ascertains that we are moving one step closer to providing more equitable educational opportunities.

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