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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN K-12 CLASSROOMS: PROBLEMS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN K-12 CLASSROOMS: PROBLEMS,
RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language

by
Trisha Michele Henderson

June 2019

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ABSTRACT

Since California is the state with the highest number of English Language Learner (ELL) students in the nation (Abedi and Levine, 2013; Estrada, 2014), there is clearly a need for what Abedi and Levine (2013) call "accommodation" in educating ELLs in K-12 classrooms. This paper is an attempt to synthesize the current scholarship surrounding K-12 educational practices of ELLs nationally, but with special emphasis on key states: California and Arizona. It begins by describing the achievement gap between the growing number of ELLs and their native English speaking peers (NSP). The paper will first discuss possible reasons for this achievement gap, including: initial placements, pullouts and re-designation practices, unreliable and invalid testing, lack of access to rigorous content, remedial pullout programs, and the overall socioeconomic status of ELL students. It will then discuss successful teaching practices with ELLs and then recommendations for areas for further study.

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CHAPTER ONE
JOURNAL ARTICLE

English Language Learners in K-12 Classrooms: Problems,
Recommendations and Possibilities

Introduction

It is well-known that literacy skills acquired in elementary and secondary schooling lay the crucial foundation for students' post-secondary success, the increasing significance of which cannot be over-stated. However, many students are not receiving this foundation, especially within the English Language Learner (ELL) population, and are thus achieving at much lower rates than non-ELL students. This achievement gap between ELLs and their monolingual peers can be found starting in elementary school, with Abedi and Levine (2013) claiming that "[a]nalyzes of national and state data show a major gap between academic performances of ELL students as compared with native speakers of English" (p. 27). The two explain that the greater the cognitive load, the greater the achievement gap. They quote Abedi, Leon and Mirocha (2003), who state that "...the higher the level of language demand of the test items, the larger the performance gap between ELL and non-ELL students" (p. 27). Possible reasons for this achievement gap may include placement and re-designation practices of individual school sites; the pulling of ELLs out of their content classes for English language testing and/or instruction (Gandara and Rumberger, 2009); the under preparedness of ELL teachers (McGraner and Saenz, 2009), the lack of rigorous

coursework for ELL students (Estrada 2014, Kanno and Kangas 2014, Wong-Fillmore, 2014); and the often unjustified placement of ELLs in special education classrooms (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). All of these factors could potentially lead to the culminating high percentage of high school dropout rates for ELL students (Sheng, Sheng and Anderson, 2011).

Since California is the state with the highest number of ELL students in the nation (Abedi and Levine, 2013; Estrada, 2014) there is clearly a need for what Abedi and Levine (2013) call “accommodation.” In other words, ELLs need assistance in achieving rigorous academic excellence; yet there is no clear idea as to what the best form of accommodation might mean. For some, it is differentiated instructional techniques and/or specific ESL courses, but, as these researchers explain, “... the concept of accommodations for ELL students is not well defined and is often misused, misdirected, and misinterpreted” and can be seen as educational inequality (p. 27). Furthermore, the initial labeling of students as ELL oftentimes provide the baseline for an ultimately unequal education from that of their native speaking peers.’ (Callahan, Wilkinson, Mueller & Frisco, 2009; Kieffer, 2008; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Wood, 2008).

In order to avoid such educational inequality, there is clearly a need to further understand the causes for this academic underachievement among ELL students. This paper seeks to address the possible causes of underachievement and provide recommendations that are based on successful educational practices regarding ELL students around the country. To these ends, the paper

begins with a review of scholarship on possible causes for underachievement of ELLs in the elementary classroom. This is followed by recommendations for successful practices that support academic development in ELLs. Finally, the paper concludes by considering areas for further study on related topics.

The Problems: Possible Causes for Underachievement of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the Elementary Classroom

The following sections synthesize scholarship on possible causes for underachievement of ELLs in elementary classrooms. Topics to be discussed are initial placements, pullouts and re-designation practices; unreliable and invalid testing; lack of access to rigorous academic content instruction, socioeconomic status of ELL students; and lastly, under-prepared teachers who are ill-equipped to meet the educational needs of a diverse population of ELLs in a high stakes environment.

Initial Placements, Pullouts and Re-designation Practices

When parents enroll their children in school, they must fill out an enrollment survey that addresses which languages are spoken in the home and to what extent each language is used (Stokes-Guinan & Goldenberg, 2011). Students are classified as ELL if any other language than English is spoken in the home, even if it is only the student's grandmother or aunt that speaks a second language, not the student themselves. In some districts, this initial classification immediately requires that students demonstrate a mastery level of proficiency in English while speaking, listening, reading and writing in order to be reclassified

as English proficient and to be exited from the label of ELL (Callahan et al., 2010). According to California state law, annual assessments of ELLs are used to document the progress of ELL students. (Macswan & Rolstad, 2006; Stokes-Guinan & Goldenberg, 2011). Up until recently, the CELDT (California English Language Development Test) was the assessment measure used for this purpose. A few years ago, the CELDT was replaced by the ELPAC (English Language Proficiency Assessments for California) as the device used statewide to address the placement and progression of ELL students. As well, tests in particular content areas are taken annually by all students. Both the CELDT and ELPAC are very similar; however, whereas the CELDT had five proficiency levels, the ELPAC only has three: Emerging, Expanding and Bridging. Furthermore, the CELDT was one test administered for two purposes: initial and annual assessment. The ELPAC is two tests for two purposes: initial identification and annual assessment. The ELPAC now includes the English Language Development standards, which are in addition to the Common Core [content] State Standards that all students must learn. (California Department of Education <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ep/celdtelpaccompare.asp>). (Note: Due to the relative newness and lack of research surrounding the ELPAC, further studies are needed to assess the long term placement effects of this test).

One significant consequence of the initial labeling and placement procedures of ELL students is that these students are often unable to demonstrate sufficient mastery of English language needed to exit out of these

low and/or remedial English classes, despite having the natural intelligence and perseverance needed to succeed in higher level content based courses. (Callahan et al., 2010). Trapped in lower level classes without access to complex texts and/or complex grammar, these students have no way to access the academic language needed for success in college preparatory classes (Callahan et al., 2010). This is a point of conflict because access to complex text (measured by Kibler, Walqui and Bunch, (2015) as "... the extent to which multiple levels of meaning are embedded in the text, how explicitly an author's purpose is stated, how typical conventions of genre are represented, the amount of figurative language used, and the text's grammatical features and vocabulary" (p. 12)) is the only way to master complex grammar and literacy skills (Wong Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012). This aligns with what other researchers know to be true: the best way to truly understand a language's grammar is to read and decipher the multiple meanings of a particular grammar usage intertwined with rich vocabulary in context throughout complex texts (Kasper, 1997; Schleppegrell, 2012; Wong-Fillmore, 2014). This advanced element of language teaching is missing from many low tracked, remedial English language courses.

Locked in a labeled system in which escape is unlikely, ELL students are thus trucked with no autonomy across their academic career through a system called tracking, which places students into perceived ability groups that are, unfortunately, oftentimes rigid and permanent. Harklau (1994) points out some overarching problems with this system when she writes:

While the ostensible purpose of tracking is to facilitate learning by increasing the homogeneity of instructional groups, research suggests that the practice is neither straightforward nor neutral. Rather, over the course of schooling, groups become permanently unequal in the education they receive and in the societal evaluation of that education. As a result of the education received in low tracks, students may find themselves ill-prepared to meet the demands of future educational or occupational goals after high school (p.217-218).

These sentiments are supported by other researchers, including Kanno and Kangas (2014), who add that being in low track courses is also usually synonymous with a hostile, antagonistic learning environment. They cite the work of multiple researchers (Hallinan, 1994; Katz, 1999; Oakes, 2005) in making the following argument:

Students in different tracks experience markedly different classroom climates. High-track teachers report positive and trusting relationships with their students while low-track teachers and students tend to develop antagonistic relationships with each other. Not surprisingly, low-track teachers spend more class time on classroom management than high-track teachers, resulting in less instructional time for low track students (p. 850).

Unreliable and Invalid Testing

As stated earlier, ELL students receive copious amounts of testing driven by current educational laws and regulations. ELL laws are under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which, in 2015, replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (California Department of Education, 2018). ESSA requires that states receiving funds for ELLs must write a plan that must be approved by the state regarding the allocation of those funds (California Department of Education, 2018). Currently, under California's plan, ELL students must take (and pass) the English-Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), as well as the statewide content based tests that all students must take, known as the California Assessments of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) (California Department of Education, 2018). If students do not pass the ELPAC by middle school and, thus, are not re-designated as English Language Proficient, they must continue to take English-Language Development classes (remedial English grammar classes) instead of elective courses and/or AP classes.

Although assessments can be useful when planning and preparing for instruction (Blanc et al., 2010), they cannot be used accurately if they are not *valid* -measuring what it sets out to measure and *reliable*- having consistency among and between different test takers as well as different test scorers (Haynes & Pindzola, 2012). Disturbingly, researchers are finding that assessments given to ELLs are oftentimes neither valid, nor reliable (Abedi & Gandara, 2006;

Macswan & Rolstad, 2006; Stokes-Guinan & Goldenberg, 2011), possibly because there is there is no uniform definition of "Language Proficiency," (Stokes-Guinan & Goldenberg, 2011) and/or because the tests are often given in English to ELL students. Hopkins et. al. (2013), explains it this way:

English language proficiency fundamentally influences students' performance on content-area assessments delivered in English. For example, students at beginning levels of English proficiency may be unable to demonstrate their math knowledge on a standardized math test administered in English because of gaps in their knowledge of English (p. 102).

In other words, content tests given in English to speakers of languages other than English are not a valid way to test a student's knowledge of the content.

This is problematic as many important decisions regarding individual students and widespread policies are made based on these assessments: course placement (AP, general education or special education (SPED)); district funding; curricular implementations, including differentiated content instruction that may or may not be needed; and resources for these implementations.

As noted above, one test in particular that ELL students must pass is the ELPAC, which replaced the CELDT: California English Language Development Test. Districts are still in transition in matching ELPAC scores to CELDT scores. The 2018 ELPAC will be aligned with the 2012 English-Language Development standards, which are different than the Common Core Standards (California

Department of Education, ELPAC). A passing ELPAC score is required before reclassification as a proficient English speaker can occur and the student allowed access to more content courses. However, as Katz, Low, Stack and Tsang (2004) point out, there is little to no correlation between a passing English proficiency test score and a passing score on content based standardized tests, like the Common Core summative assessments.

Despite the fact that ELL students take language proficiency tests that may or may not be beneficial to them as individuals, either for reclassification purposes or for academic mastery of the Common Core State Standards, their group scores may be of use to researchers. The complicated intertwining of individual and group data is looked at by Stokes-Guinan and Goldenberg (2011) and Linn (2003). Stokes-Guinan & Goldberg (2011) attempt to explain that although the CELDT [and perhaps now the ELPAC] has the potential to incorrectly classify and/or reclassify individual students up to 60% of the time, it can be effective when making decisions about ELLs as a group, but not as individuals, in terms of funding received by the district as a result of its ELL test scores. Decisions made according to group performance on standardized tests is something with which Linn (2003) is familiar. He clarifies the difference regarding tests whose aims are not to track individual students, but rather to track their progress as a group: "In many instances the standards that are set are not used to make any pre-specified decisions about individual students. Instead the performance standards are used for reporting the performance of groups of students and for tracking

progress of achievement for schools, states, or the nation" (p.4). Linn nevertheless also highlights problems of tests for individual ELLs. He asks: What good are unrealistic performance standards that are absolute, rather than normative, if the absolute absolutely fails the majority of its takers with devastating consequences? These questions suggest that there is still much room for individual students to fall through the academic cracks, especially ELL students who are being absolutely failed on these tests, rather than normatively compared with their monolingual peers. Indeed, one wonders how native English speakers would perform on the language proficiency tests that English Language Learners take. Would native speaking kindergartners be able to demonstrate the required language mastery for kindergarten ELLs?

Abedi and Gandara (2006) further question the validity, accuracy and fairness of other tests taken by ELLs when they delve into the issue of tests that are designed for native speakers of English but are taken by those who are still acquiring vocabulary proficiency in English. They write, "The National Research Council has warned that the use of achievement tests developed for English speaking students will not likely yield valid results for students who are not proficient in English" (Abedi & Gandara, 2006, p. 39). However, despite these cautionary statements, standardized tests have become the accepted norm for demonstrating the procured knowledge of a population.

Katz (1999) equates the dividing of a population based on standardized test scores to racism (as cited in Oakes, 1985):

One of those structural conditions [that perpetuates racism] is the evaluation of human worth and intellectual potential based upon scores of standardized tests known to discriminate against certain groups of students. Another is tracking, also based on test scores, which sorts students into rigid and often racially divided hierarchical groups (p. 817).

The consequences of tracking and/or potentially invalid and unreliable test scores can lead to an overwhelmingly high dropout rate for Latino students. Katz (1999) goes on to explain that this dropout rate is not to be blamed on students and elaborates by writing: "Drop out implies a conscious choice on the part of the students, as if all options were open to them. However, students of color leave school largely because they feel discriminated against, stereotyped or excluded" (p. 812). These students include ELLs, and the discrimination they face can take the form of course placement.

Lack of Access to Rigorous Academic Content Instruction

Due to the problematic assessment processes discussed above, there is a profound lack of ELL students in AP and GATE classes (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Katz, 1999) and there is a disproportionate number of ELLs in special education (SPED) classes (Macswan & Rolstad, 2006); thus widening an ever growing achievement gap between ELL students and their monolingual peers (Johnson & Wells, 2017).

Evidence that ELLs are not in classes with rigorous academic content can be found in Callahan et al.'s (2010) study, which explored the implications of mandated ESL classes for ELL minority students. The team used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, "which provides individual, family, and school characteristics of a nationally representative sample of sophomores enrolled during the 2001-2002 school year" (p. 6). Their sample contained 2,352 students in 523 schools who were then coded as either language minority students or native English speaking students. Throughout the study, the team looked at several factors that could affect the overall academic achievement of all the students: Academic preparation, prior achievement, individual and family characteristics, parental involvement and school characteristics. They also closely looked at how, when, and why students would be classified as ELL and, thus, be confined to ESL classes. Disturbingly, these researchers found that while there was no positive benefit to being enrolled in ESL classes, there were several negative effects, such as being significantly less likely to enroll in college

preparatory classes. Specifically, Callahan et al. (2010) found that linguistic minority students in ELL programs were 45% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory science courses and 48% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory social science courses than linguistic minority students not placed in ELL programs.

These statistics may, in part, be due to the procedural way language minority students are placed into their courses. Harklau's (1994) ethnographic study provides insight into how this process can occur. She closely monitored four language minority students' academic trajectories through their secondary school's course offerings. Over the course of two years of observation and through informal and formal interviews with students, teachers and counselors, she found that based on perceived ability, students were 'dealt' like cards into either high or low track classes with little to no hope of removal or change from low track into high track once placed. Furthermore, the two tracks received vastly different literary experiences: low track curriculum emphasized basic decoding and comprehension skills from abridged texts; high track curriculum, on the other hand, offered students opportunities synthesizing multiple authentic sources for the purpose of making argumentative claims and engaging in critical thinking. Harklau (1994) explains it this way: "Low track classes not only left linguistic minority students with academic training that would eventually limit their access to further educational and, ultimately, occupational goals; these classes also limited students linguistically" (p. 232).

This placement system where students are either placed in the low track (not receiving college preparation) or high track (receiving college preparation) is consequentially problematic because it is oftentimes the ELLs who are in the low track courses. This means that ELLs are not receiving access to rigorous college-preparatory classes, and are more likely to not even apply to and/or attend college (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

ELLs Pulled out of Content for Remedial ELL Courses

Some ELLs are pulled out of their content courses to receive remedial English Language development time. This limits the amount of core instruction ELLs receive as well as structured language interaction with their peers regarding the content (Gandara & Orfield, 2012). Gandara and Orfield (2012) go on to explain the minute details of this educational arrangement in their article, "Why Arizona matters: the historical, legal, and political contexts of Arizona's instructional policies and U.S. linguistic hegemony." As the title of the article suggests, historical, legal and political factors all have had a direct effect on current educational practices in Arizona. Based on the result of ongoing legal battles fighting discriminatory English only practices, the article describes what policy makers (with little to no educational experience, let alone teaching English as a second language experience) deem as the best way to educate Arizona's multi-lingual youth: four hours of isolated English development courses, with little, if any, time spent on content instruction with native speaking peers. This article ended with the *Horne v. Flores* (2009) decision, which allowed the states to

determine how to educate ELLs, including the best way for funding to be spent.

Since ELL students in many states spend so much time in remedial and/or ELD classes, they struggle with completing the required graduation coursework (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). This may be a contributing factor to the relatively high dropout rate for ELL students (Gandara & Orfield 2012, p. 18).

Poverty, Socioeconomic Status and Home Life of ELLs

All of the above mentioned scholarship offers valid points to consider when assessing possible reasons for achievement gaps between ELLs and their native speaking peers. According to Cherciov (2013) and Høglund and Leadbeater (2004), it is poverty, socioeconomic status, students' home life, classroom ecology and attitudes toward the L1 and L2 that affect ELL students' attitude toward learning, and, therefore, their achievement levels (See also Drajea & O'Sullivan, 2014). Other factors impacting ELL achievement include pre-school and kindergarten social and academic readiness factors (Bulotsky-Shearer et al, 2011) individual student motivation and analytical ability, (Grigorenko et al, 2009) family educational aspirations, parental support, social factors (including time spent on homework, absences from school, school safety climate) and school factors (percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch and average class size) (Casillas et al, 2012); as well as students' general home lives and instances of maltreatment at home (Mallett, 2017). All of these factors contribute to a student's performance in an academic setting.

Under Prepared ELL Teachers

ELL students oftentimes receive under prepared teachers (Calderon, Slavin & Sanchez, 2011; Johnson & Wells, 2017; McGraner & Saenz, 2009), especially in high poverty areas (Crawford & Hairston, 2018). Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) observe the following about under prepared ELL teachers in classrooms:

At present, the majority of teachers have had little or no professional development for teaching ELLs; few have taken a course focused on issues related to ELLs; and most do not have the experiential knowledge that comes from being proficient in a second language. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of teachers report that they do not feel prepared to teach ELLs (p. 361).

These contributing factors ultimately lead to a high teacher turnover rate (Katz, 1999), which compounds the problem: under prepared teachers contributing to a lack of achievement among at-risk students.

The unfortunate link between under prepared teachers and under achievement among at-risk students underscores the fact that students learn best with highly educated and motivated teachers (Calderon, Slavin & Sanchez, 2011; de Jong, Harper & Coady, 2013) who construct positive and trusting relationships with their students (Cooper & Mines, 2014; Wentzel, 1997). There is a large learning curve, however, as teachers agree that they understood the most about how to best teach ELLs effectively from firsthand experience, rather

than their initial teacher preparation programs (Faez & Valeo, 2012).

In an attempt to improve teacher preparation in working with ELL students, the state of California's teaching preparation program now requires teachers to be CLAD (Cross Cultural, Language and Academic Development) or BCLAD (Bilingual, Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development) certified (CDE, CLAD/BCLAD). Teachers who are BCLAD certified have reported feeling most prepared to teach ELL students, because their bilingualism allowed them to effectively communicate with their students in the students' primary language (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005).

Recommendations: Successful Practices for Supporting ELLs' Academic Development

As the research described above suggests, there are flaws in the current educational system regarding the teaching of English to ELL students. The following sections will discuss recommendations regarding effective policies and practices for teaching elementary ELLs. These recommendations relate to the need for: attention to academic language in content instruction and developing the quality of teacher preparation programs.

Attention to Academic Language in Content Instruction

Many ELLs have an insufficient academic vocabulary in their L2, with researchers noting that, although students may demonstrate a high amount of communicative/social language, they do not always have a sufficient amount of academic language for the appropriate discourse (Gee, 1989). Recent

scholarship has focused on pedagogical strategies that help students to comprehend and use academic language in the context of content instruction. (Cervetti, Kulikowich & Bravo, 2015).

Scholars have stressed that vocabulary is best learned by dynamic processes involving the use of language in content based contexts (Kasper, 1997; Wong-Fillmore, 2014). When students are taught language skills in isolation (e.g., during remedial language pullout programs), they are presented with disjointed, fragmented information that lacks schematic consistency. However, through content based instruction, students are able to engage in complex ideas through the use of complex schemata that link complex texts, therefore simultaneously facilitating their language learning experience (Kasper, 1997; Piaget, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2012; Wong-Fillmore, 2014).

In the approach known as Sheltered Instruction, images, videos, realia, manipulatives and kinesthetic activities are used to make the academic language being taught in content areas, including terms for abstract concepts, more concrete for ELL students. Additional scaffolds considered to be effective by Cervetti, Kulikowich and Bravo (2015) are word mapping, having extra time on assignments, completing graphic organizers during a lesson, using environmental print as a resource, including repetitions and restatements of questions and responses for both teachers and ELL students, choosing which students to speak by strategies other than raised hands (e.g., equity sticks and cards) and using similes and metaphors to explain content to students. They say:

Many of the scaffolds that have been developed as part of Sheltered Instruction are concerned with mitigating the frustration and cognitive challenge of layering the linguistic complexity of science instruction on top of challenging and abstract science concepts. With both a cognitive and linguistic load with which to contend, it is argued that by making abstract concepts more concrete, content area learning is facilitated for ELLs (p. 87).

Utilizing multi modal teaching strategies has also been researched by Silverman and Hines (2009) who conducted a study regarding the effectiveness of multi-media teaching of academic vocabulary to both ELLs and non-ELLs. They found that by augmenting read alouds with the use of multi-dimensional multimedia presentational techniques, (such as a supplemental and complementary video that included live action, animation, voice over, text and music) the knowledge gap of specifically targeted science words (e.g. *same, different, predator, prey, discover, community, habitat, explore, creature, rare etc.*) was closed between non-ELLs and ELLs (Silverman & Hines, 2009). The two authors go on to explain that this augmentation may be effective because "complementing the traditional storybook reading format, in which children hear a book read aloud and see the static pictures in the book, with a multimedia presentation that reinforces the meaning of the text may benefit children learning a second language" (p. 305).

Another type of vocabulary scaffolding strategy -and one that Wong-Fillmore (2012) recommends- is getting students to consciously attend to and analyze the vocabulary and grammar of complex texts in content areas. Indeed, Wong-Fillmore (2014) claims that ELL students can not only meet but exceed the Common Core standards if given access to complex curriculum that they have needed (and been denied) in the past. She explains that an unfortunate common practice in teaching ELLs is to provide them with a 'watered down' version of the texts being studied by mainstream students; ultimately denying ELLs the rich, textual reading, discussion, and writing experiences needed to adequately understand and use a language to the fullest extent in all its registers. As a linguist, she vehemently champions explicit language instruction through the literate interaction with complex texts. Specifically, her recommendations include reading, writing and discussing original, content based complex texts for students aged kindergarten through high school. In this way, classes grammatically deconstruct textual sentences and phrases into meaningful examples of how language is used for specific purposes. She emphasizes that, "[I]n linguistically speaking, we know that there is no language learning without access to input that provides evidence of how the language is structured and how it works to communicate information" (p. 626).

One type of language-focused activity that Wong Fillmore has advocated is leading students through careful linguistic analyses of individual sentences in complex texts. As Wong-Fillmore (2012) explains, "[t]he goal of these

conversations was to help students learn to unpack the information so tightly packed into academic texts, and in so doing, gradually internalize an awareness of the relation between specific linguistic patterns and the functions they serve in texts" (p. 6). This specific attention to language in context is illustrated by a video demonstrating a third grade class labeling and analyzing complex grammatical features of sentences found in their content readings (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNhqc37qUfs>). In the video, students discuss the following sentence: "Although plebeians made up the majority of the people in Rome, they still did not have all the rights of the elite." As a class, students explore the role of conjunctions, articles, subjects and predicates, to name a few grammatical features. As Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) explain, this expansion of vocabulary into an in depth look at how grammar contributes to layered meanings within a text is crucial, and, oftentimes missing from elementary classrooms. They write, "There is only one way to acquire the language of literacy, and that is through literacy itself."

Schleppegrell (2012) further explains related pedagogical strategies by building on the notion that all language exchanges are examples of functional registers, with school language being no exception. She goes on to explain that children, both ELLs and non-ELLs, arrive at school with different levels of known registers, or knowing when and how to use language effectively in different circumstances. Her approach, therefore, is explicitly teaching the fluidity of language across genres, discourses and subjects through the use of vocabulary

dependent upon the genre, discourse or subject in question, rather than teaching the language skills in an isolated context. She writes,

[A]cademic language is a set of registers through which schooling activities are accomplished. As [children] learn the knowledge needed to engage in the activities, children also need [explicit] support in using language effectively to accomplish the purposes of these activities across grades and subject areas (p. 413).

In addition to content based instruction, ELL students should also have ample time to practice discussing the content they are learning with both their native speaking and bilingual peers (Cervetti, Kulikowich & Bravo, 2015). One district calls this process, "Miles on the Tongue," where students use sentence frames to discuss the content material with their peers before formally giving an answer to the teacher and/or writing about it by themselves. Examples of these frames include: " I agree with _____ because _____ " or "I respectfully disagree with _____ because_____." The driving theory behind this point is that much of language learning, even academic language learning, occurs through socialization with peers, routinized practice of content and legitimate participation opportunities. (Kanagy, 1999; Lave and Wagner, 1991; Vickers, 2007). Wong-Fillmore (2014) explains it this way: "To learn a language, children require ample and close interactional contact with speakers of that language because such speakers provide them with evidence as to how the language works in meaningful communication" (p. 625).

An example of this kind of social learning and textual interaction comes from Kibler, Walqui and Bunch (2015), who describe a middle school English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies (SS) unit that makes the Common Core standards accessible to ELL students. This particular unit focuses on persuasive rhetoric. Throughout the multi-week lessons, students are given reason and opportunity to participate with meaningful learning activities with each other, such as analyzing current advertisements for tone, mood, and modality in multimodal texts; building background of persuasion in historical contexts by reading and analyzing the Gettysburg Address; applying logos, ethos and pathos to Civil Rights speeches; as well as writing their own persuasive essay using the micro and macro persuasive elements taught in the unit. Students are given specific and deliberate help in the form of academic language scaffolding as they engage in and discuss these complex textual activities.

A particular example of scaffolding that Kibler, Walqui and Bunch (2015) explain is called a Clarifying Bookmark. In this strategy, students work in groups to read, discuss and make meaning of a complex text. The Clarifying Bookmark has three levels of questions: basic comprehension questions, background connections and further applications; but, students do not move on to the next level of questions until the teacher decides that the majority of the students understand each level. The activities offer students suggested language for expressing their uncertainty and perseverance in trying to understand the text with phrases like, "I'm not sure what this is about, but it may mean...", "I don't

understand this section, but I do recognize..." and "I understand this part, but I have a question about..." (p. 21).

Another scaffolding technique discussed by Kibler, Walqui and Bunch (2015) is having students read a text that has been re-typed by the teacher to include different fonts: bold, italic and regular. Students work in groups of three as they each only read the sentences printed in their assigned font. This allows students more time to practice reading items they may not fully understand. Personal perseverance in grappling with a text is taught and reinforced.

Increase the Quality of Teacher Preparation Programs and Teachers' Professional Development Opportunities

All of the above mentioned recommendations may not be sufficient if teachers are not effectively prepared to implement them. As Calderon, Slavin and Sanchez (2011) write, "Effective teaching is critical to student learning" (p.118). This is supported by other researchers who claim that in order for teachers to be most effective, teacher preparation programs may need to be reformed with an intensified focus to the needs of ELL students (de Jong, Harper & Coady, 2013; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Johnson & Wells, 2017). Further changes that must be made to the teacher preparation and professional development programs come from de Jong, Harper & Coady (2013), who explain that effective teachers of ELL students must also:

- (a) [understand] ELLs from a bilingual and bi-cultural perspective; (b) [understand] how language and culture shape school experiences and

inform pedagogy or bilingual learners; and (c) [have the] ability to mediate a range of contextual factors in the schools and classrooms where they teach (p.90).

Some researchers go so far as to suggest that international teaching opportunities are the best way to increase teachers' multicultural and multilingual sensitivities in preparation for effective classroom teaching (Gonzalez-Carriedo et.al. 2017). Others recommend additional professional development opportunities, including a Master's degree, as a way for teachers to feel more prepared and/or effective teaching English to ELL students (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005).

Conclusion

This paper has acknowledged an existing achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers in K-12 classrooms that oftentimes culminates in a high dropout rate and limited access to higher education for ELL students. In addition, this paper has also identified possible reasons for this gap and has provided recommendations for improving the education these students receive.

In light of the preceding discussion of the literature, the following educational practices are recommended to increase the academic development of ELLs: Attention to vocabulary, specifically, academic language in content instruction and increasing the quality of teacher preparation including, but not limited to, more professional development opportunities for teachers.

Furthermore, special care should be placed on building ELL students' vocabulary

through dynamic processes involving multimedia and multiple opportunities to practice discussing their content based knowledge through interaction with their peers.

These recommendations are given in hopes of closing the achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers.

There is room for further study as well, on the following questions: How does individual ELLs' motivation and perceived group identity affect school, district and state level achievement? To what extent do teacher beliefs and/or their educational backgrounds impede or direct compliance with district and state level policies? How does the student to teacher ratio and overall class size bear upon the practices that teachers may [or may not] be implementing in their classrooms?

Related factors that also warrant future research include the effects of institutional racism, ever changing educational policies, high stakes test scores, and the behavioral manifestations of students in response to these factors. Teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum, and K-12 classrooms are a swirling vortex of variables all affecting individual and group achievement. Research based policies are always needed as guidance to those who are academically preparing tomorrow's citizens and leaders.

CHAPTER TWO

CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL

Everyone wants the best education for their children. However, due to circumstances beyond the individual's control, this may or may not be possible. Scholars have noticed an increasing achievement gap between English Language Learners (ELLs) and their Native Speaking Peers (NSP) in K-12 classrooms (Abedi and Levine, 2013). This presentation will examine possible reasons for this achievement gap that may include initial labeling of students as English Only (EO) or English Language Learner (ELL). These initial labels can lead to some ELLs to be placed into low track courses without access to rigorous content. I then consider teaching practices that can be effective with ELL students, such as Sheltered Instruction, explicit teaching of academic genres, and explicitly discussing the role of grammatical features in context, one sentence at a time. The paper concludes with questions for further study.

CHAPTER 3

CONFERENCE PAPER

English Language Learners in K-12 Classrooms: What is a Day in Their Academic Preparation Like?

As a first grade teacher, I have noticed that there is a discrepancy between the education students receive if they are labeled an English Language Learner (ELL) and the education they receive if they are designated as an English Only (EO) student. This labeling is done through the Home Language Survey that all parents must fill out when enrolling their children in public schools. If parents indicate that any other language than English is spoken in their home, then their student is immediately classified as an ELL. As a result, this instant classification requires that students demonstrate a mastery level of proficiency in English while speaking, listening, reading and writing in order to be reclassified as English proficient and to be exited from the label of ELL. Annual assessments are given to students to monitor their progress towards mastery of English. If students do not demonstrate adequate mastery of English before reaching junior high and high school, they must then continue taking remedial English language classes instead of their graduation requirements, college entry requirements and/or general elective courses. However, these re-classification language tests are difficult for even native speakers of the same age and grade level to pass. (Sample practice tests for grades K-12 can be found at the California Department

of Education's website: [https://www.elpac.org/resources/practicetests/.](https://www.elpac.org/resources/practicetests/))

To make matters more difficult for these ELL designated students, they sometimes do not have access to a quality education. Instead, ELLs are more likely than their native speaking peers to not receive rigorous content instruction. Evidence that ELLs are not in classes with challenging academic content can be found in Callahan et al.'s (2010) study, which explored the implications of mandated ESL classes for ELL minority students. The team used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, "which provides individual, family, and school characteristics of a nationally representative sample of sophomores enrolled during the 2001-2002 school year" (p. 6). Their sample contained 2,352 students in 523 schools who were then coded as either language minority students or native English speaking students. Throughout the study, the team looked at several factors that could affect the overall academic achievement of all the students: Academic preparation, prior achievement, individual and family characteristics, parental involvement and school characteristics. They also closely looked at how, when, and why students would be classified as ELL and, thus be confined to ESL classes. Disturbingly, these researchers found that while there was no positive benefit to being enrolled in ESL classes, there were several negative effects, such as being significantly less likely to enroll in college preparatory classes. Specifically, Callahan et al. (2010) found that linguistic minority students in ELL programs were 45% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory science courses and 48% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory

social science courses than linguistic minority students not placed in English Language Learner designated programs.

When ELLs are placed into non-college-prep, low-track classes, the instruction that they receive can be both limited and limiting intellectually. Harklau's (1994) ethnographic study provides insight into how this process can occur. She closely monitored four language minority students' academic trajectory through their secondary school's course offerings. Over the course of two years of observation, informal and formal interviews with students, teachers and counselors, she found that based on perceived ability, students were 'dealt' like cards into either high or low track classes with little to no hope of removal or change from low track into high track once placed. Furthermore, the two tracks received vastly different literacy experiences: low track curriculum emphasized basic decoding and comprehension skills from abridged texts; high track curriculum, on the other hand, consisted of synthesizing multiple authentic sources for the purpose of making argumentative claims and engaging in critical thinking. More specifically, low track classes relied heavily on their textbook, which contained 2-3 page excerpts of the original texts without the cultural and historical background needed to comprehend the content. Furthermore, curriculum in these classes involved students decoding the textbook, either by reading aloud or silently to themselves. By contrast, higher track class curriculum involved students reading independently from a variety of authentic sources before participating in meaningful class activities about the readings. For

example, students in high track courses not only read several unabridged Shakespearean works, but also wrote their own approximations to share in groups with their peers. Harklau (1994) explains it this way: "Low track classes not only left linguistic minority students with academic training that would eventually limit their access to further educational and, ultimately, occupational goals; these classes also limited students linguistically" (p. 232).

Finally, amidst everything else, ELL students are pulled out of the content instruction they do receive in order to more fully develop their English language proficiency. However, this tactic may be more harmful to students than beneficial, as it is precisely eliminating that which is known to increase language competence: meaningful textual based conversations with peers as well as explicit text based language instruction regarding how language works in context.

The above noted problems in the current education system leave room for improvement. Suggestions made by language education scholars (Kasper, 1997; Piaget, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2012; Wong-Fillmore, 2014) include increasing the amount of exposure to academic language through content based textual discussions as well as explicit instruction on how language is used for various purposes in varying contexts.

One approach to giving ELLs such language support for challenging content material is known as Sheltered Instruction. This approach involves using images, videos, realia, manipulatives and kinesthetic activities to make the academic language being taught in content areas, including terms for abstract

concepts, more concrete for ELL students. Additional scaffolds considered to be effective by Cervetti, Kulikowich and Bravo (2015) are word mapping, extra time on assignments, completing graphic organizers during a lesson and using environmental print as a resource. In their words, they explain:

Many of the scaffolds that have been developed as part of Sheltered Instruction are concerned with mitigating the frustration and cognitive challenge of layering the linguistic complexity of science instruction on top of challenging and abstract science concepts. With both a cognitive and linguistic load with which to contend, it is argued that by making abstract concepts more concrete, content area learning is facilitated for ELLs (p. 87).

Schleppegrell (2012) offers another, more genre-focused approach to building ELLs' English language abilities within the context of content courses. She advocates explicitly teaching the fluidity of language across genres, discourses and subjects through the use of vocabulary dependent upon the genre, discourse or subject in question, rather than teaching the language skills in an isolated context. She writes,

[A]cademic language is a set of registers through which schooling activities are accomplished. As [children] learn the knowledge needed to engage in the activities, children also need [explicit] support in using language effectively to accomplish the purposes of these activities across grades and subject areas (p. 413).

In other words, Schleppegrell explains that every instance in academia must be taught with the parameters of appropriate social discourse explicitly covered, lest there be a miscommunication or misinterpretation between student and teacher. Students must be trained that the language they use to discuss a story is different than the language they will use to complete a science project; as is the language used to complete oral versus written assignments.

Schleppegrell's efforts are supported by Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) who use the same tactic in a different way. Whereas Schleppegrell focused on registers, Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (2012), instead, encourage educators to look at the specific grammatical features of sentences from content based textual readings, or, as they call it, the exploration of "Juicy Sentences." In this strategy, educators provide one grammatically rich sentence for their students to disentangle not only for its meaning, but for how the meaning is conveyed as well. Educators ask driving questions to lead their students into understanding how the nuances in language work together to create powerful prose. Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) explain:

The goal of these conversations was to help students learn to unpack the information so tightly packed into academic texts, and in so doing, gradually internalize an awareness of the relation between specific linguistic patterns and the functions they serve in texts (p.7).

This Juicy Sentence approach is illustrated by a video demonstrating a third grade class labeling and analyzing complex grammatical features of sentences found in their content readings (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNhqc37qUfs>). In the video, students read and discuss the following sentence: "Although plebeians made up the majority of the people in Rome, they still did not have all the rights of the elite." As a class, students explore the role of conjunctions, articles, subjects and predicates, to name a few grammatical features in this sentence. As Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) explain, this expansion of vocabulary into an in depth look at how grammar contributes to layered meanings within a text is crucial, and, oftentimes missing from elementary classrooms. They write, "There is only one way to acquire the language of literacy, and that is through literacy itself."

In both linguists' strategies, there is an additional factor: conversation as an academic tool. This means that ELL students should also have ample time to practice discussing the content they are learning with both their native speaking and bilingual peers (Cervetti, Kulikowich & Bravo, 2015). One district calls this process "Miles on the Tongue" where students use sentence frames to discuss the content material with their peers before formally giving an answer to the teacher and/or writing about it by themselves. The driving theory behind this point is that much of language learning, even academic language learning, occurs through socialization with peers, routinized practice of content, and legitimate participation opportunities. (Kanagy, 1999; Lave and Wagner, 1991; Vickers,

2007). Wong-Fillmore (2014) explains it this way: "To learn a language, children require ample and close interactional contact with speakers of that language because such speakers provide them with evidence as to how the language works in meaningful communication" (p. 625).

"Miles on the Tongue" involves children of all ages and academic language ability discussing the content being studied in their classes. At the elementary level, fun and novelty are required elements for successful student engagement. As such, there are a plethora of fun strategies involving ways to systematically have students talking to each other. One of these strategies that can be used in a Miles on the Tongue Approach is having students assigned a 'peanut butter and jelly' discussion partner, where both partners (peanut butter and jelly) have a role or task to complete during a two-minute talking activity. Another strategy is called a carousel, in which there is an inner circle and an outer circle of students. The inner circle rotates in a manner similar to speed dating, which allows students to talk to multiple people about the topic. Last, is a specific type of student-led discussion called Cat Fish in which students are either a cat or a fish. Cats are assigned the task of grading their fish on the content delivered and the degree of academic complexity in which this is accomplished before they switch roles. Throughout this teaching and learning practice, students have the opportunity to learn from each other not only by what is said, but also how it is said. (Complete sentences, eye contact and topic related productions are a must.) Throughout this activity, sentence frames are

provided to students such as: "I agree with _____ because _____", " I would like to add on to what _____ said...", and " I respectfully agree/disagree with _____ because _____." In this manner, students gradually internalize the academic vernacular required to participate in such proceedings

A final suggestion regarding improvement to ELL education is to increase transparency between school practices and parental rights/choices. To this end, parents should be more educated in terms of what the implications are for their child to be labeled ELL, including the types of courses that they will or will not have access to if they have that label. Parents should also know that they have the right to request Advanced Placement (AP) classes for their students. Also, I recommend that students should not be labeled as ELL at the elementary level, as all students at that age are all language learners and all are acquiring the basic vocabulary and grammar needed to succeed in their later academic careers.

This paper has acknowledged an existing achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers in K-12 classrooms that oftentimes culminates into a high dropout rate and limited access to higher education for ELL students. In addition, this paper has also identified possible reasons for this gap and has provided recommendations for improving the education these students receive.

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There is room for further study as well on the following topics: How do individual student motivation and perceived group identity affect school, district and state level achievement? To what extent do teacher beliefs and/or their educational backgrounds impede or acquiesce compliance with district and state level policies? How does the student to teacher ratio and overall class size bear upon the practices that teachers may [or may not] be implementing in their classrooms? Related factors that also warrant future research include the effects of institutional racism, ever changing educational policies, high stakes test scores, as well as the behavioral manifestations of students in response to the above stated items. Teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum, and K-12 classrooms are a swirling vortex of volatile variables all affecting individual and group achievement. Research based policies are always needed as guidance to those who are academically preparing tomorrow's leaders.

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