

Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to assess the validity and effectiveness of a commonly accepted methodological practice in ELL education: 'sheltered' instruction. The effectiveness of this practice will be gauged on student achievement as evidenced in a comparison of pre- and post-test scores. Teacher and student interviews will also be conducted, and in-class observations will take place to provide further data to ascertain the effectiveness of these practices. The aim is to identify best practices for ELLs to ensure that their unique educational needs are addressed in the mainstream classroom. First, I will provide some background information regarding this particular instructional method. Then, I will outline how professional development will be conducted to ensure that the participating teachers are capable of successfully practicing sheltered instruction in the mainstream classroom for the ELL participants. Pre- and post-tests will be administered to ELLs to determine the impact of this method on academic assessments. Additionally, students will participate in preliminary and follow-up interviews to express their opinions of and experiences with sheltered instruction in the mainstream classroom.

The Effectiveness of Sheltered Instruction in Mainstream Classrooms**Introduction**

The number of non-native English speaking students in this country has forced schools to address the additional needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) in United States classrooms. This subgroup of students has experienced significant and unprecedented growth; due in part to the increased ability of school employees to identify and accurately place these students, and to the shift away from “sink or swim” traditional immersion. ELLs in the past would have been placed in a mainstream classroom and the unfortunate learners would “sink” while the lucky linguistically gifted individuals could “swim” (or at least tread) towards English language and academic success. As of late, the immersion model has been criticized as ineffective and even inhumane and it is so infrequently implemented that it is essentially obsolete. Current transitional ELL models emphasize accurate placement of students into classrooms with others of comparable English ability. The goal is to transition students from intensive English language instruction to a mainstream classroom. In this paper, the terms *mainstream*, and *regular education* classroom will be used to refer to classrooms that the majority of students, those not requiring special services (either remedial or gifted), would enroll in. The goal of transitional ELL program models is to prepare students for academic success in the mainstream classroom.

English language learners are a specific and particular subgroup of the school population and as such they have unique needs. Because of the diverse nature of ELLs, it is difficult to generalize the myriad needs of this subgroup. ELLs undoubtedly face challenges everyday as they struggle to communicate on a daily basis in a country with a

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foreign language. These students may be unfamiliar with United States customs and even simple tasks may seem overwhelming and daunting. ELLs certainly have emotional, social, psychological, and educational needs that are distinct from and possibly greater than the needs of students who are native to the U.S. For the purposes of being concise, this study will focus primarily on the educational and academic needs of ELLs in mainstream classrooms, and will seek to determine the effectiveness of the popular methodological practice of “sheltered” instruction.

This will be accomplished by first ensuring that teachers are aware of what sheltering is and how it can be implemented in the mainstream classroom. This will be accomplished via professional development workshops. Then, ELL students ready to transition to the mainstream classroom will be given an exam to determine comprehension. After three months of instruction they will be given another exam. At the end of this six-month study, students will be given a final comprehensive exam. Students and teachers will participate in brief interviews at each of these checkpoints (beginning, middle, end). Additionally, I will conduct formal classroom observations once a month and provide teachers with feedback. Students will be observed in their Language Arts and Social Studies classes. I hope to answer the questions: Is sheltered instruction effective for ELLs in the mainstream classroom? Why is this practice effective or ineffective?

In this paper, I will discuss the implications of sheltered instruction in the regular education classroom as well as the research that has taken place regarding this subject. Then, I will describe my research project in detail, providing justifications for why things

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are done in specific ways. Finally, I will discuss the projected findings and implications for further research and inquiry.

Background

Sheltered instruction is not just one technique or methodological approach but rather a plethora of teaching techniques, some designed to specifically meet the needs of ELLs and some just general “good teaching” strategies. It asks the teacher to “consider language learners’ home experiences as well as educational background, first and second language and literacy proficiency, and cultural and religious norms” (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). Once the teacher has taken these aspects into consideration, sheltered instruction, which will look different for each student in each classroom, can be implemented. In sum, “sheltered instruction combines both tried-and-true instructional techniques that characterize what experienced educators know as good teaching practices and instruction specially designed to meet the linguistic and educational needs of immigrant and nonimmigrant second-language learners in U.S. schools” (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). What this entails in the mainstream classroom includes but is not limited to: use of cooperative learning activities, focus on academic language and key content vocabulary, judicious use of ELL’s L1 to facilitate knowledge of the L1, use of hands-on activities with authentic materials, modeling, and explicit teaching and implementation of learning strategies.

One study, conducted by Echevarria, Short, and Powers in 2006, tested the sheltered instruction model to ascertain its effects on academic literacy development. The reason they were interested in conducting this study is because of the lagging academic achievement of ELLs when compared to language-majority peers, particularly in standardized exams that frequently determine school funding under NCLB. For

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example, “Eleven percent of 7th grade ELLs who took the reading portion of the [California] state test in 2002 scored at or above the 50th percentile, compared with 57% of English-proficient language-minority students and 48% of all students who took the tests” (Echevarria et al., 2006). It is clear that this population of students is dramatically underperforming on standardized tests and that education research must seek to find ways of closing this gap, which is especially poignant in the era of NCLB and accountability.

One of the reasons that ELLs are struggling to transition into the mainstream is simply that teachers are ill equipped to meet their unique educational needs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2002, “Fewer than 13% of teachers in the nation have received professional development to prepare them for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students” (Echevarria et al., 2006). Furthermore, although the federal guidelines require teachers to be “highly qualified” in core subject areas, they do not require these teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of second-language acquisition, ELL methods, or sheltered teaching methods. In fact, in 2004, “41.2% of 2,984,781 public school teachers reported teaching ELL students, but only 12.5% of those teachers had 8 or more hours of training in the previous 3 years” (Echevarria et al., 2006). These statistics are even more depressing when one considers that some very simple implementations greatly increase the probability of ELL success in the mainstream, if only regular classroom education teachers were made aware of them.

Clearly there is a discrepancy between the educational needs of ELL students and the ability of regular education teachers to meet these needs. For this reason, as well as the inevitable increase in this population of students, this research project is timely and relevant. The study referenced in this section, “The Effects of Sheltered Instruction on

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the Achievement of Limited English Proficient Students”, is a national research project that was conducted over seven years. The aim was to determine if sheltered instruction improves the achievement of ELL students in core content areas, and if there were significant differences in achievement data for students whose teachers had sheltered instruction training versus those students whose teachers had no formal training in the technique. They determined that there are eight components essential for making content comprehensible for ELLs: “(a) Preparation, (b) Building Background, (c) Comprehensible Input, (d) Strategies, (e) Interaction, (f) Practice/Application, (g) Lesson Delivery, and (h) Review/Assessment” (Echevarria et al., 2006). These eight broad categories contain subcategories that outline how best to improve education in mainstream classrooms for ELLs. After this model for successful implementation of sheltered instruction was developed, a group of teachers was trained and their classrooms observed. “The results of this study reveal positive effects of the sheltered instruction model on student literacy achievement as measured with a writing assessment” (Echevarria et al., 2006).

In addition to this study, I also looked at Echevarria’s prior research, conducted in 2000. This study was titled, “Using Multiple Perspectives in Observations of Diverse Classrooms: The Sheltered Instruction Protocol.” Because her more recent study built on the foundations of this initial study, I will not go into great detail about her methodology here; however, I will briefly discuss some of her key findings as they have shaped the direction in which I seek to go with my research project. As a working definition of sheltered instruction, I will use the following: “Sheltered instruction is an approach for teaching content to English language learners in strategic ways that makes

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the subject matter comprehensible while promoting students' English language

development.” This definition is taken from Echevarria's 2000 research project. This research determined that teacher success with the implementation of sheltered instruction improves over time. The more comfortable a teacher is with implementing sheltered instruction, the more confident he or she is working with the ELL subgroup in the mainstream classroom.

Methodology

Based on previous research findings, this research project will not utilize a control group of teachers not versed in the sheltered instruction methodological model. Since prior research revealed that teachers report that having a well-articulated model of high-quality instruction empowers them to work more effectively with ELLs, this project will focus on the effects of sheltered instruction in mainstream classrooms where teachers can effectively deliver this type of instruction for the ELL population.

Setting and Participants

This research project will take place in a suburban, K-8 school setting with a very diverse student population. Approximately 22% of students in 7th and 8th grade require English language services. Some ELLs are deemed to not have the required English proficiency to succeed in the mainstream classroom. These students participate in an ELL “Core” in which they are only with other ELLs and not mainstreamed in regular education classrooms with the exception of non-academic subjects such as Art and Physical Education. Other students who have been “exited” from the intense ELL language instruction program receive “pull-out” services in which they are pulled from their classrooms to receive one-on-one or small group attention focusing on improving

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any areas in which they are struggling. This project will focus on those ELLs who are in mainstream classrooms and have therefore been deemed to have an acceptable level of English proficiency, but still receive pull out services to supplement their education.

Common languages spoken include Tagalog, Urdu, Spanish, and Korean. Students will be evaluated based on their academic success with sheltered instruction in Language Arts and Social Studies. In this school, these two classes are taught in a three-hour block referred to as “Core.” Three different 7th and 8th grade Cores will be observed, each containing a minimum of 5 ELL students. Students spend the bulk of their day in this classroom therefore it is considered an appropriate class to use when considering the effectiveness of sheltered instruction. The objective of this study is to determine if and why sheltered instruction works or does not work for ELLs in mainstream classrooms. To keep things simple, I will only be using Core classes to evaluate data, not science or math classes for example, even though sheltered instruction may be effective in these disciplines as well.

Teacher Education

In order for this study to yield verifiable results, teachers must be on the same page in terms of implementing sheltered instruction in their classrooms. In a 2001 study by Cheryl Stanosheck Youngs found that a teacher’s general educational knowledge impacts his or her ability and receptiveness to teaching ELLs. One significant finding revealed, “teachers who indicated [in surveys] that they had received some – that is, any – form of ESL training were significantly more positive about teaching ESL students than those who reported having no ESL training at all” (Stanosheck Youngs, 2001). While the study also showed that those with extensive experience with other cultures either by

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living abroad or studying a foreign language were also much more receptive to teaching ELLs, it is neither possible nor practical to require that teachers have this type of experience prior to working with ELLs in mainstream classrooms. However, it is very possible to provide teachers with in-services and continued professional development. In this study, teachers will attend three eight-hour sessions of intense sheltered instruction education the summer before the start of the school year. Every other month, they will be required to attend one 3-hr “refresher course.” Needs assessment surveys will be administered to teachers so that these sessions can be tailored to meet the needs or concerns that teachers are noting occurring in the classroom. These professional development sessions will provide teachers with concrete means for the implementation of sheltered instruction for ELLs in Language Arts and Social Studies.

Data Collection

Data will be collected both quantitatively and qualitatively at various points throughout the six-month study. Because of the nature of this study, the tests and observations will evolve with the project and cannot be set in stone initially. First of all, students will be given a test to assess their English language ability level with reading and writing assessments. This assessment will occur within the first week of the school year. The purpose of this ‘intake’ exam is to see where students are at in terms of academic English at the start of the school year. Because all of these students have passed an exit exam from the intense ELL program, it is assumed that they will not be absolute beginners but will at least have a working knowledge of the English Language. The intake exam will be used to compare the initial work of the students versus their work three-months into the school year and six-months into the year. The questions,

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writing prompts, and reading passages on the exam will all be in the realm of Language Arts and Social Studies. The test takers will have one 44-minute class period to complete the exam and it will be short enough to allow them ample time to attempt the assessment to the best of their abilities. The subsequent tests (at the mid-point and end of the six months) will also be designed to be completed in a 44-minute class period. These assessments will use increasingly more difficult and academic language and will have more content-based questions to help identify if concepts are being internalized in addition to language skills. Again, a lack of specificity is being used at this point in the process because the assessments will be developed only after consultation with the regular education and ELL teachers in the building and after the individuals being assessed are known.

Two other means of data collection will be utilized: student and teacher interviews, and classroom observations. I will observe the teachers classroom once a month and provide the teacher with feedback about the lesson and how well sheltered instruction is being incorporated into the class. This observation will be recorded with a videotape. Once a month should be sufficient for me to observe growth in the teacher and for her to practice implementing the feedback that is given before another observation is scheduled to take place. The video recording, observation notes, and subsequent conversations with teachers will serve as one form of data. Additionally, data will be collected via individual interviews with the ELL students and the teacher. An interview will be conducted prior to, at the midpoint, and at the end of the study. For the student, questions will be geared towards what is most beneficial to them in the classroom setting. I will ask things like: "Do you like or dislike when the teacher does ___

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_____? Why or why not? What is your favorite thing about Core and why? How you do feel when_____? What do you do when you are confused or don't understand something?" I will be able to fill in the blanks as the questions become more evident. For teachers, I will ask questions such as: "What do you need to be able to serve ELLs effectively in the mainstream classroom? Are you comfortable implementing sheltered instruction in the classroom? Have you become more comfortable with it as time goes on or does it become increasingly daunting? Have you notice change in ELL student achievement or attitude since the start of this process? Again, the questions will evolve and increase in specificity as the project is implemented. Interview questions and responses will be documented by a nonbiased third-party whose role is to sit in on the interviews and transcribe the questions and answers word for word.

Data Analysis

Once the data is collected it will need to be evaluated in a quantitative and qualitative way. The assessment results at the beginning, middle, and end point will be critically evaluated to determine if students improve with academic language and subject area content throughout the course of the study. Each assessment will contain a reading passage as well as a writing sample and reading comprehension and writing ability will be tracked via these assessments as well. The details and implications of these findings will be one way in which the data is evaluated.

Additionally, teacher observations and feedback meetings will be analyzed to determine teacher-centered aspects of education such as the logistics of implementing sheltered instruction in mainstream classrooms. Observations will be recorded with a video camera to ensure objectivity. These recordings will be analyzed and interpreted to

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ensure that sheltered instruction is being effectively implemented in the classroom.

Notes that I have taken in the classrooms will also be reviewed and the feedback sessions with teachers will be taken into consideration as well. These data will be analyzed primarily to ensure and determine that sheltered instruction in an effective form was actually taking place in the mainstream classroom throughout the course of the study so that the rest of the data and results will be accurate.

Finally, student interviews will be an important part of the data analysis process. These interviews will be transcribed by a third party and not videotaped to ensure that students feel as comfortable as possible and to keep the process relatively unobtrusive for them. Student answers to interview questions will be carefully considered and the evolution of their responses to interview questions as the study progresses will be analyzed. The data garnered in this section will act as the voice of the ELL and help the researcher determine if and how ELL needs are met with sheltered instruction in the mainstream classroom.

Projected Findings

Based on past research that has indicated success with sheltered instruction for ELLs in mainstream classrooms, I expect to find that students in classrooms with a teacher well versed in the art of sheltered instruction to experience increased academic success and less anxiety. Further, I predict that students will experience growth specifically in the arena of academic language as well as subject area content comprehension. These predictions are based not only on prior research, but also on what we know about second language learners in general. The more they can be integrated into the mainstream, the less ostracized they feel and the greater their impetus to do well

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in school. I suspect that the assessments will show improvement and the interviews will show increased understanding and educational satisfaction for ELL students in mainstream classrooms. As far as the teachers are concerned, I believe that they will come to the realization that effective sheltering is not a daunting task but one that with practice can be easily implemented in the mainstream classroom. While there is no way to say for certain what the outcome of this research will yield, I do believe that sheltering instruction is a very valid methodological practice grounded in research and as such will prove an effective means of reaching the ELL subgroup.

Conclusion

There is no escaping the fact that ELLs have had and will continue to have an impact on U.S. school and mainstream classrooms. As human beings with rights and feelings, it is the responsibility of schools to provide for ELLs and offer the opportunity for these students to receive an equitable education including instruction of academic language so that they can have an opportunity to succeed once they are out of school and in the work force. Teachers have a professional responsibility to strive to meet the needs of ALL students in their classrooms, even if this requires modifying curriculum, materials, and activities. With proper professional development, teachers will learn the skills necessary for the education of learners of the English language in regular education, mainstream classrooms, and we will be one step closer to meeting the needs of ELLs in U.S. schools and providing them with the adequate education they deserve.

References

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