Collaborative Inquiry Groups: Empowering Teachers to Work with English Language Learners

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Abstract

As grade-level teachers in the United States become increasingly responsible for educating English language learning (ELL) students, it is imperative that they re-evaluate their perspectives on instruction. This paper describes a program designed to prepare in-service teachers for enhancing their instructional effectiveness with ELL students in their traditional classrooms. The program emphasizes the use of collaborative inquiry groups in which teachers serve as critical colleagues, challenging one another to implement research and theory-driven practices and, most importantly, reflect upon their existing assumptions with regard to the instruction of ELL students. Teachers participating in the program completed a survey to describe their experience in an inquiry group. The findings of this study demonstrate noteworthy changes in teacher perspectives on language differences among, and appropriate literacy paradigms for, ELL students. Key among these changes were participants’ demonstrated transformations in perspective regarding the role of native language support in ELL students’ development of literacy and content-area skills and understandings.

What happens when the focus of language arts in the grade-level classroom must be expanded to encompass intensive and ongoing literacy development for English language learning (ELL) students? What happens when even the most successful, monolingual grade-level teachers must develop the capacities to support literacy development in the second language (L2) and in the first

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language (L1) of the ELL student? These questions reflect the realities of grade-level classrooms in English-speaking countries around the world, and are extremely relevant to teaching language arts in U.S. classrooms.

On one hand, ELL students now constitute what is perhaps the fastest growing student population in the United States (104.97% increase from 1989-2002, U.S. Department of Education, 2002). On the other hand, less than 13% of the grade-level educators who will deliver language arts instruction to these students in the United States have had eight or more credit hours of professional development relevant to the literacy capacities and needs of these students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Given this scenario, of exceptional concern is the finding that language differences among ELL students are regularly perceived not as assets (e.g., the foundation for bilingualism), but as problems that schools must remedy (Escamilla, 2006; MacSwan, Rolstad, & Glass, 2002). In fact, this belief is so pervasive among teachers and policymakers that some school districts have begun to refer to these students as semilinguals (Escamilla). This socially constructed concept is largely based on the widely held perception that the great majority of ELL students (especially Spanish-speaking ELL students) have little or no literacy in either their first or second language (Escamilla; Valadez, MacSwan, & Martinez, 2001). Some argue that such ELL students are unlikely to benefit from ongoing native language support and that their English literacy must be developed beginning with the assumption of a tabula rasa.

In language arts curricula and classrooms, this perception of the ELL student as a “bi-illiterate” (Escamilla, 2006, p. 2330), is frequently translated into an over-reliance on reading research and programming that is almost exclusively grounded in the English language. In turn, this myopic perspective often serves as the foundation for the development of literacy programs that are based on a plethora of unchecked assumptions. Most problematic among these are the assumptions that “good teaching is just good teaching” (Bernhardt, 2003; Escamilla) and “good teaching anywhere is good teaching everywhere” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 182)—that is, those literacy practices found effective with English-dominant, monolingual students in suburban classrooms, for example, will prove equally effective with linguistically diverse students in urban classrooms.

Ultimately, these good teaching paradigms of literacy instruction come to serve as assumption-based standards of “best practice” against which the performance of ELL students is evaluated. Regrettably, assumptions of what constitutes effective practice often fail to match the reality, and ELL students’ performance is frequently stigmatized as problematic. The possibility that the paradigm is inappropriate to the population served, is seldom considered (Brisk, Burnhardt, Herrera, & Rochon, 2002; Escamilla, 2006).

The question then becomes: In what ways can programs of professional development best prepare grade-level classroom teachers of language arts for the changing realities and formidable challenges associated with literacy development for ELL students? The success of the CLASSIC© (Critically-reflective, Lifelong Advocacy for Second language learners, Site-specific Innovation, and Cross-cultural competency) Model of professional development suggests that collaborative inquiry groups are a promising way of preparing
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teachers to address the needs and assets that ELL students bring to the language arts classroom.

**Professional Development Model**

Elsewhere, we have detailed the specifics of the CLASSIC© Model and field-based research that has documented its effectiveness in the high-quality professional development of grade-level teachers for cultural and (especially) linguistic diversity in the classroom (Brisk et al., 2002; Herrera, Murry, & Perez, 2008). In brief, this model for capacity building among school educators of ELL students has been utilized by seven universities and over fifty school districts in six states with over 2,500 school educators. The CLASSIC© Model targets communities of inquiry through its emphasis on perspectives of lifelong and collaborative learning among teachers of ELL students. To this end, the CLASSIC© Model organizes teachers into collegial inquiry groups that collaborate in theory-into-practice applications of their professional development (according to their own site-based school and district dynamics). These groups are inquiry-based to the extent that group members are encouraged, through site-based applications, to question even longstanding assumptions of both classroom practices and school/district policies with a critical lens.

For example, in the methods course of the program curricula, teachers learn about the range of language programming options available to schools and districts in the education of their ELL students (e.g., bilingual education, ESL education). Through their collaborative inquiry groups, these practitioners are then prompted to compare current effectiveness research on these models with the policy-driven programming models used in their own schools. These comparisons involve a critical lens that encourages teachers to treat the research and theory on programming models as potentially disconfirming evidence. In other words, for the dynamics of a specific school and the ELL population served, does the research confirm or disconfirm the appropriateness of the current programming model for the site-based dynamics? If the evidence is found to be disconfirming, teachers are encouraged to ask difficult questions, such as: What factors have contributed to the assumption that the model is appropriate? What assumptions about literacy development for ELL students have prompted the school or the district’s selection of or persistence with the current programming model? Finally, what advocacy actions can group members take to encourage reconsideration of those school or district policies that are often grounded in unchecked assumptions?

The success of the CLASSIC© Model, with its emphasis on communities of inquiry, has been summatively measured according to the performance of participating teachers on the standardized ESL Content Area Test of the Praxis II Exam. The results of these assessments demonstrate participant performance that is consistently 40-80 points above average cut-off scores for ESL Endorsement (College of Education, 2007). Longitudinal examination of teachers’ performance on the Praxis II demonstrates their knowledge of best practices for ELL students. Similarly, teachers’ performance in (best practice) portfolio development and classroom walk-throughs recurrently confirms appropriate skill development toward accommodative and differentiated instructional and assessment practices with ELL students. However, as CLASSIC© participants
build their capacities for the high-quality teaching of language arts and other subjects to ELL students in grade-level (also known as mainstream) classrooms, little is known about participants’ examination (and potential transformation) of personal and professional assumptions about language differences among, and appropriate literacy paradigms for, ELL students in their classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to utilize qualitative research methodology to explore this research problem.

**Inquiries into Language and Literacy: A Study of Teachers’ Perspectives**

In what ways do teachers’ perspectives on language differences among, and appropriate literacy paradigms for, ELL students change as a result of their experiences with colleagues in collaborative inquiry groups? When teachers in communities of inquiry are encouraged to use a critical lens to examine such issues, what outcomes are possible? To explore these questions, we administered a qualitative, open-ended survey to examine the perspectives of grade-level classroom teachers in five states: Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. Among the educators enrolled in the program in these five states, 10% taught at the Pre-K through K levels, and 90% were elementary teachers. Responding teachers were participants in the first course (ESL Methods) of a 15-credit hour program of professional development leading to ESL Endorsement, the curricula of which was delivered according to the CLASSIC© Model of capacity building for classroom diversity. In particular, this course explored research and content detailed in Herrera and Murry (2005) and Brisk (2008).

Much of what distinguishes the assets and differential learning needs of ELL students from those of grade-level peers is language—more specifically, a different first or native language. Unlike the native-born, English-dominant, grade-level learner, the ELL student is frequently asked to perform at grade level in the content areas (including Language Arts). At the same time, he or she must confront the many challenges of acquiring a second and unfamiliar language (i.e., English). Accordingly, in this study, what remained unknown and of interest were the dispositions or perspectives of grade-level teachers toward language differences among ELL students, and especially the literacy paradigms necessary to accommodate those linguistic differences.

A qualitative design guided this research and is appropriate when the outcomes of the study will surround descriptions and interpretations arising from discovery, insight, and analysis (Creswell, 2008). The purposive sample of 125 teachers yielded a survey response rate of approximately 78%, with comparable subsamples from each state. Emic saturation coding of the data yielded two major themes in perspectives (as detailed in text to follow) that were shared across teachers of the sample. These themes represent ELL teacher perspectives as demonstrated through teacher voice. Qualitative trustworthiness criteria (Creswell) established the truth value of findings. For example, the onus for the transferability of qualitative research rests with the reader and his/her ability to relate the findings to her/his educational setting. Therefore, in this study, transferability was targeted through a thick description of research designs, activities, and outcomes, key elements of which are summarized in this paper. In addition, credibility was established through referential adequacy (Creswell), which involves the archiving of selected data that is subsequently analyzed only
after tentative interpretations of the data have been formulated, based on other/prior coding.

*Teachers’ Linguicentric Baseline Perspectives: When in America, Learn and Speak English*

As the survey response excerpts that follow will illustrate, teachers’ perspectives toward language differences and alternate literacy paradigms tend to evolve over time toward ones that are more inclusive, sensitive, and accommodative. However, their initial or baseline perspectives are often highly indicative of their experiences and preparation in the dominant, monolingual U.S. culture. For example, Marcy wrote:

> There was a time not long ago that I thought, when in America, learn and speak English! Now, through these classes I have learned it is just as important for these ELL students to speak their own language (Vietnamese) to be able to make connections to the English language to be successful in learning the L2 [the second language – English].

Although Marcy’s perspectives on other languages, especially students’ use of their L1 or native language, have changed over time, by her own admission her initial perspective was quite linguicentric. That is, her perspective held: I’m an American, you are in my classroom, you need to learn and speak my language – English. Like many individuals of the dominant monolingual culture in the United States (including many of her fellow teachers), Marcy had grown accustomed to, and was most comfortable with, the tenets and values of her own culture. This ethnocentrism is not at all uncommon and is in fact one characteristic of most cultures (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2006). Because the tenets of a culture frequently are shared and communicated through language, her linguicentricity is equally typical.

Other teachers hold the linguicentric belief that ELL students who speak languages other than English in the classroom must be talking about them (the teacher). Ellen’s realizations about her changing perspectives on native language use in her instructional setting were illustrative of this view:

> I have changed [perspectives on native language use in the classroom] because I no longer feel like students will be talking about me when they speak to each other in Spanish. I have learned to ask my students to let me know what they are talking about when they are speaking their native language. I have also learned that the kids feel really special when you let them tell you what a word would be in their native language. It provides connections that the kids need.

For Ellen, her initial experiences with language differences among students were foreign, unexpected, and threatening. Although she might have considered a variety of explanations for students’ native language conversations, her first culture-bound and linguicentric impulse was to interpret these unexpected communications as antithetical to the teacher’s management of the learning environment.
Teachers’ Emergent and Differentiated Perspectives: Bi-Literacy is Cool

Teachers who participated in this study held perspectives on language difference and literacy paradigms that changed over time as these practitioners built new capacities for effective practice with cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. For many participants, these evolutions are best characterized as emergent transformations in perspective—from a perception of ELL students that can be described as bi-illiterate (Escamilla, 2006), to a realization that bi-literacy among ELL students is not a deficit, but an asset to be nurtured and developed. Sharon wrote:

In my group [the collaborative inquiry group], we talked a lot about this issue [language differences among ELL students]. Many of the teachers in the group felt that most of our ELL students had little or no understanding of English or their home language [bi-illiteracy]. We discussed our positions at length. While we all acknowledged that English was a problem for many [ELL students], some of us argued that we had not done much to explore their level of development in the home language . . . By allowing them [the ELL students] to speak and share in their first language, I’m just beginning to realize how much they already know about science, math, and reading in their home language.

Sharon’s emergent transformations in perspectives on language difference and literacy paradigms are a product of both healthy debate in a community of inquiry and her own exploration of ideas prompted by those inquiries. While the debate has encouraged her to question widely-held assumptions about the actual incidence of “bi-illiteracy” among ELL students, her own investigations have surfaced previously unrecognized assets that her ELL students bring to the classroom and to her efforts to promote their English literacy development.

For other teachers, bi-literacy among ELL students is already celebrated, encouraged, and nurtured by teachers and grade-level students alike. Renee’s thoughts and observations on native language support serve to highlight these dynamics:

One of my team members has the ELL students teach her class some of the common words they use in class (i.e., Spanish words that the students share to ensure common understandings of what is taught). This has allowed these students to feel less self-conscious because the other students think that it is cool to learn a new language. I think it is especially cool for my ELL students to grow and develop in two languages. In group discussions, we have shared examples of how to use students’ first language in our classrooms . . . using cognates, translating the English vocabulary for lessons to their first language, and peer groupings from the same ethnic [language] backgrounds.

Members of Renee’s inquiry community have discovered ways to approach bi-literacy as cool. In the process, they have simultaneously lowered the affective filter (level of learning anxiety) for ELL students while motivating grade-level students toward the celebration of bi-literacy as an asset of value to all students.
Ultimately, emergent transformations in perspectives on bi-literacy are, for some teachers, grounded in a deeper understanding of the rationales that justify ongoing first/home language support as ELL students acquire a second language in the grade-level classroom. Beth’s story is indicative of these deeper understandings:

Prior to being enrolled in ESL Methods, I disagreed with students being able to speak their native language in my classroom. Although after taking this course I now completely agree with students speaking their L1 in my classroom. I didn't have knowledge about students processing skills and information from their L1 to their L2. My ELL students are now encouraged to speak in their native language, especially to my translator, and to my bilingual students.

To the extent that Beth’s perspectives on native language support in the classroom have evolved from first language prohibitions to the active promotion of bilingualism and bi-literacy, her growth may be characterized as transformative. Especially critical to this transformation is her emergent recognition that ELL students process “skills and information from their L1 to their L2.”

What Beth and other teachers of ELL students are beginning to understand is the notion of the transfer theory (Cummins, 2001; Escamilla, 2006). In order to fully appreciate transfer theory, we first need to understand the interference hypothesis. As we have discussed, teachers, may prohibit native language use among ELL students in the classroom for a variety of reasons. For some teachers, it is an issue of linguicism. For others, it is an issue of language interference. This interference hypothesis holds that teachers who provide the ELL student with native language support are actually inhibiting or interfering with the learner’s capacity to begin new literacy development (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing) in the target (English) language. The basis for this literacy paradigm is the SUP/CUP distinction. A SUP (separate underlying proficiency) perspective on language and literacy holds that the first language (L1) and the second or target language (L2) operate independently (Cummins). As such, there is no need to promote ongoing literacy development in L1, which has the potential to interfere with the target L2 language development.

Conversely, a perspective that favors the concept of CUP (common underlying proficiency) holds that although the two languages may differ at the surface level, they are actually quite interdependent at deeper levels of cognitive function (Cummins, 2001). It is this interdependence that enables the increasingly bi-literate ELL student to transfer cognitive understandings and some language skills from L1 to L2 – thus, the notion of the transfer theory. This theory is especially valuable to teachers of language arts because it demonstrates that what is taught in one language does not necessarily need to be re-taught in the second language.

Some research suggests that children who lack age-appropriate language ability in L1 (sometimes referred to as semilinguals or alinguals) do not necessarily benefit from transfer (sometimes referred to as cross-language transfer or CLT) at the same levels as students who are more proficient in their native language (e.g., bilinguals). The particulars of this research are beyond the
scope of this paper but are thoroughly summarized by Sun-Alperin (2007). Nevertheless, a broad range of existing and emergent research does tend to support consistently positive relationships between language ability in L1 and phonological awareness development in L2 (Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, & Wolf, 2004; Hancin-Bhatt, 2008; Lopez & Greenfield, 2004; Sun-Alperin). Especially notable is the study by Dickinson and colleagues which found that receptive vocabulary (words that are recognized upon sight) is strongly related to phonological awareness (the ability to distinguish units of speech, such as words, syllables, and phonemes) within and across languages, even among L1 students identified as at-risk for successful literacy acquisition.

Why the Changes in Perspectives: The Role of Critical Inquiry

As their stories illustrate, teachers in this study experienced a demonstrable change in their perspectives on language differences among, and appropriate literacy paradigms for, ELL students in grade-level classrooms. These results beg the question: What factors contributed to these changes, these transformations in perspective? Evidence from teachers’ survey responses suggests that colleagues were instrumental in participants’ interrogations of their deeply embedded assumptions and culture-bound perspectives. Participants’ collaborative inquiry groups provided the forum through which participating teachers could begin to ask and discuss, if not debate, tough questions about language and language arts. For example, Margaret initially had misgivings about the use of students’ native language during lessons.

My inquiry group has definitely changed my thinking on allowing ELL students to speak in their native language during class time. I previously thought that it was inappropriate and rude for students to speak in another language in my room, as I was mostly worried about what the student was saying about others in the room. Now, I have allowed ELL students to converse with each other during discussion times and on projects, especially if the ELL student is in the silent phase. I have paired stronger ELL students (who are more able to switch from L1 to L2) with those who are struggling with a particular topic or problem. This has shown great improvement in morale of the “silent” student, as well as a more in-depth conversation and understanding about that certain subject.

Group inquiry enabled Margaret to question her longstanding perspective that native language use during class time was “inappropriate and rude.” Through inquiry-focused discussions with peers, Margaret has let go of some of her assumptions. As she continues to do so, she not only experiences changes in her perspectives on language but is also beginning to experiment with a different sort of literacy paradigm for her ELL students. Margaret’s students benefit because the new paradigm fosters differentiated classroom strategies that address both their subject understandings and the many challenges of second language acquisition.

In other cases, critical colleagues offer the classroom teacher opportunities for perspective taking (Mezirow, 1991). Willingness to re-examine issues and assumptions from a new and different perspective is often the outcome of peer-
to-peer interactions that have been specifically structured to target a common goal (i.e., critical inquiry). In Becky’s case, perspective taking and critical colleagues have influenced her willingness to re-examine her understanding of classroom events and phenomena—including her understandings about language.

My inquiry group has really influenced my understandings about ELL students in the classroom. I have begun to realize how much language affects every part of learning and communicating. One teacher from my group has given different examples of how native language is used in her room. She has shared on many occasions how using the native language has become an important part in sharing the lesson through other students. She allows students to share answers in his/her native language to other native speakers that are more advanced in the second language. Then the more advanced native speaker can give the less advanced native speakers a response in English to share with the rest of the class. I think this shows a wonderful example of collaboration on the student's part.

Through perspective taking, Becky came to realize that language is about much more than communication. In fact, language is fundamental to student learning. Being involved in a collaborative inquiry group enabled Becky to hear her colleague share potential strategies for incorporating native language support to enhance academic learning opportunities for ELL students. Through critical discussions with colleagues, Becky has learned that peer grouping according to native language is but one way to facilitate this extended learning.

Conclusion
Grade-level teachers of language arts must begin to reevaluate their perspectives on language, language difference, and appropriate literacy paradigms for the growing population of ELL students in the United States. The support of professional colleagues can be pivotal to the willingness of teachers to confront their assumptions and revisit their perspectives. The findings of this study indicate that transformation of perspectives is possible and can be facilitated through collaborative inquiry groups that employ a critical lens. Inquiry group members serve as critical colleagues, challenging one another to check assumptions, make connections between research/theory and their own professional practice, and employ literacy practices that promote bi-literacy and content-area learning for ELL students.

Collaborative inquiry groups provide teachers with a forum for confronting the difficult questions of language difference in the context of today’s culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Certainly, a focus on inquiry encourages educators to examine longstanding perspectives on and practices in, the teaching of language arts with ELL students. For many educators, their changes in perspectives may be characterized as emergent transformations. Becoming increasingly effective at accommodating the needs and assets of ELL students is a lifelong endeavor. However, with the continued support of colleagues, grade-level classroom teachers can continue to enhance their professional practice with ELL students.
References