

Language Teaching Curricula

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Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent a large majority of those who set out to learn a language other than their mother tongue in school systems in English-speaking countries. These students work to acquire English as a Second Language (ESL) in the process of their schooling. According to the US Census, in 2011, more than 30% of all students in US schools are ELLs who are speakers of approximately 500 languages. In practically all school systems in various world regions, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, or the U.K., ELLs come from a great wide variety of backgrounds. These students can be recent immigrants, children of guest workers or of employees of multinational companies, or other types of sojourners, as well as individuals raised in families or communities where English is not used for communication. In the regions where English is the primary language of schooling, a great deal of resources, such as supplementary instruction in language and skill development, teacher preparation, education, and special training, curricula, textbooks, or teaching materials, time, and financial means are dedicated to providing ELLs with the essential proficiencies that are fundamental in their schooling (e.g. listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing). Due to the fact that the number of ELLs in school systems in various countries is expected to grow, extensive and intensive efforts have been undertaken to meet their language learning needs.

Research Findings

To date, an enormous amount of data has established that a dramatic divide persists in the academic achievement of ELLs and other groups of students (e.g. Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Miller, Kostogriz, & Gearon, 2010; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Data consist of test and examination scores, graduation rates, a broad range of language proficiency measures, and a vast body of research. A key reason for the prominent and persistent achievement divide stems from the fact that ELLs need to develop their language proficiencies simultaneously while attaining and demonstrating knowledge of content in school subjects, such as social studies, history, and math. Currently, there is no empirical validation of the effectiveness of curriculum designs developed specifically for ELLs (e.g. Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Hinkel, 2011; What Works Clearinghouse, 2009). For this reason, the remainder of this overview will take a brief look at the two most predominant and widely adopted curricular models for teaching ELLs language and content simultaneously.

At present, two different types of curricula that seek to combine instruction in both language and school subjects are prevalent in various world regions. Content-based language and subject-matter instruction is commonly adopted in U.S. and Canadian school curricula; whereas genre-based language teaching predominates in the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.

The main principles of content-based curricula consist of integrating second language reading, writing, and language instruction with subject-matter content, such as history or math (e.g. Snow, 2005; Snow and Brinton, 1997). For example, integrated instruction in content and language can pivot on thematically-selected readings or writing tasks, with the attendant language teaching that focuses on the uses of grammar and contextualized vocabulary. In some cases, content-based instruction can also have supplementary foci on other academic skills, such as critical thinking, library research, or information gathering (Hinkel, 2006).

Content-based teaching in the form of Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) has been widely adopted in U.S. schools that enroll large numbers of ELLs. The SIOP model in effect represents a framework for teaching school subjects and language in mainstream classes. To this end, SIOP also deals with various classroom strategies and techniques for teachers who work with ELLs in their schools (e.g. Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008). Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, the What Works Clearinghouse has examined eight studies of the SIOP effectiveness. According to this review (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009, p. 1), none of the eight empirical studies of SIOP effectiveness meet "evidence standards," and thus no conclusions can be made "based on research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of SIOP" (p.1).

Outside the U.S., as well, several important and practical concerns have been widely noted regarding content-based instruction and the teaching of language at the same time. One of these, for instance, pertains to the level of expertise in matters of content and language expected of mainstream or language teachers who work within content-based curricular models. Many empirical reports indicate that language teachers are trained to deal with language pedagogy, but are far less trained in the areas of content and school subjects (e.g. Met, 1998; Snow, 2005). On the other hand, in the context of language-centered curricula, it may be difficult to determine what content should be included for the purposes of language development. Additionally, in content-based instruction, research has not yet established what content needs to be taught in order to advance students' language skills (e.g. Swan, 2005). In light of the fact that a great deal of preparation and work is required for teaching content to ELLs, in many cases, the teaching of the language, for example, grammar or writing, is often neglected. As an outcome, a vast majority of instructional materials on content-based teaching consistently emphasize the need for intensive and focused language instruction (e.g. Hinkel, 2004; Snow, 2005).

In the U.K., New Zealand and Australia in particular, genre-based curricular models and approaches predominate among methodological schools of thought on language and subject-matter instruction. Genre-based curricula, similar to content-based teaching, also seek to integrate the teaching of language with instruction in reading and writing. The genre-based approach and teaching techniques draw on the foundations of systemic functional linguistics and genre theory. These analytical approaches serve as the basis for teaching the language required of ELLs in school subjects. To this end, genre-based language instruction centers on the features of language employed in a diverse range of

spoken and written genres, such as school textbooks, academic speaking and writing, or subject-matter assignments that require both reading and writing. This curricular model addresses a broad array of genres from news reports to textbooks and formal written prose. The overarching objective of genre-based pedagogy is to enable ELLs to analyze school discourse while reading and writing in order to produce written prose typically expected in the context of schooling (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

In genre-based curricula, language teaching endeavors to address the features of discourse and text in the social and practical contexts where the written prose is produced and the purposes which it is expected meet. To achieve this goal, teaching activities may represent an analysis of written prose in such genres as textbooks in social sciences or history, or math story problems. Classroom teaching is designed to increase students' awareness of particular grammar and vocabulary elements found in school texts or other contexts (e.g. Schleppegrell, 2004).

However, as with the content-based curricular design, the effectiveness of genre-based curricula and teaching methods has not been established empirically. Many experts in the teaching and learning of language and second language contend that genres and their linguistic features may be subjective, culture-bound, vaguely defined, or even irrelevant to diverse types of ELLs (e.g. see Leki (2007) for a thorough discussion). For example, Henry Widdowson, one of the prominent world-class authorities on language teaching (Widdowson, 2003, p. 69) states that "the conception of genres as stable entities is only a convenient fiction: they are in reality sociocultural processes, continually in flux." According to Widdowson, the findings of genre analyses represent impressionistic judgments about their distinctiveness, and therefore, such findings simply have limited validity. Thus, given that genres are far from well-defined, the pedagogic viability of genre-based curricula and the attendant teaching of genre-defined discourse and language features is in fact "limited" (p. 70).

Summary and Recommendations

Valid research is urgently needed to identify language skills and teaching methodologies to help bridge the unmistakable achievement divide between ELLs and other cohorts of students. In the final count, the overarching objective of empirically-grounded and principled curricular designs is to provide ELLs with access to educational opportunities and to enable these students to communicate effectively in a broad range of educational and social contexts.

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