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English Language Learners: Problems and Solutions Found in the Research of General Practitioners of Early Childhood

Douglas D. Bell, Ph.D. and Barry L. Bogan, Ph.D.

Abstract— Increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in early childhood classrooms have created challenges for in-service teachers in the general education setting. Traditional teacher preparation programs tend to lack a curriculum that focuses on second language teaching and learning. This paper reviews the problems facing teachers with regard to teaching at the level of research based best practices for ELLs. In addition, a critical examination of the literature has yielded basic solutions for practitioners. These solutions encompass programmatic (classroom) aspects, teacher training, and classroom pedagogy. The authors have concluded that based on the present literature, more research is needed to identify specific strategies and practices for educating non-native language learners in today's classrooms.

The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in classrooms of young children is increasing dramatically (NCELA, 2011). According to the national census, it is estimated over the next five years that almost 20% of the population of children from ages 5-17 years will be from homes where a language other than English will be spoken (U.S. Census, 2011). A large majority of these children, about 40%, will be in our early childhood classrooms (Russakoff, 2011).

While the numbers of ELLs is increasing, the teachers and educational systems receiving them face a challenge. The teachers lack preparation and training for working with students that are second language learners (Bell, 2010; Futrell et al., 2003). Agencies that accredit teacher preparation programs have been requiring exposure to diverse populations of learners for more than ten years (NAEYC, 2009). However, focused preparation techniques specifically designed to ensure high quality teaching of young ELLs are limited (Bell, 2010; Pica, 2000). Early childhood

teachers receive only an introductory level of exposure in relation to working with diverse populations. In conclusion, the research literature demonstrates limited information on effective pedagogical practices with ELLs, especially young ELLs.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine challenges and basic solutions for teaching ELLs that are in early childhood classrooms. The challenges are explored first in the order of teacher, social, and school. The solutions presented are derived from research based best practices to support the general education early childhood teacher in the administration of second language teaching strategies. The solutions will examine the areas of program quality, teacher dispositions, and classroom practices.

Young ELLs are already developmentally in a position of challenge. They have the typical issues that young children face (Bell, 2010). These issues include being literal, not fully understanding logic, being egocentric, and being concrete learners (Piaget, 1962). Young ELLs have all of the same barriers as typical young children along with all of the challenges related to learning a new language. In addition, they do not understand the language of instruction in their preschool, the language of their friends, and their needs are misunderstood. Lastly, the ELL can get confused when the first language sounds are similar to English sounds but used in different contexts (Young, 1996). The wide range of variability in language mastery can create challenges in teaching the ELL.

There is more to learning English than vocabulary and grammar (Cummins, 1979,1980,1981; Snow, 1992). The social situation of language use can be even more challenging for the ELL than the linguistic aspects. Children have to know when to use certain terminology and how to use idioms and slang. These aspects of language learning can be very confusing. Additionally, children learning a second language have a communicative competence barrier (Cummins, 1979). The children are unsure of the functions of the new language and the appropriateness of language usage within specific contexts (Xu & Drame, 2008). This inability creates stress and frustration on the part of the child and reduces the initiative to become part of the community; this is known as the affective filter (Dulay & Burt, 1974). This inability to communicate can be equally frustrating for the teachers as well (Gillanders, 2007).

ELL CHALLENGES

The research suggests that the increase in ELLs will impact our educational curriculum and teaching prescriptions (Han and

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Bridglall, 2009). The population shift and its educational consequences present a new set of challenges for classroom teachers. This section lists specific challenges noted by the research, which will include academic, social, teacher preparation, and school level difficulties.

When young children are learning a new language, being placed in a program that speaks only one language can create a challenge (Fernandez, 2000). Often, the children cannot receive the individual attention and interactions they need in their primary language (Rodriguez, Diaz, Duran, & Espinosa, 1995). Another challenge is the cultural disconnect between the student and the practices of the classroom or content of the curriculum (Meyer, 2000). The children not only have the linguistic barriers to face, but also the sociolinguistic (Gillanders, 2007). Furthermore, research has identified that ELLs are at risk for failing academically in reading and math at the K-12 level (Halle, Hair, Wandner, Nnamara, & Chien, 2012), and the findings allude to the understanding that the infrastructure to support ELLs is not established for success.

Teachers are realizing that the academic and social aspects of language and learning are interrelated (Genishi, 1981). Sometimes, the children do not gain equal ground as playmates with the children that speak English as a primary language (Fassler, 1998). Unfortunately, the ELLs have to show their value as a playmate to be accepted by English speaking peers. The teacher has to actively scaffold both the ELLs and the English speaking children to build relationships. The lack of peer relationships can impede development and learning through play, as well as decrease the potential for support in learning English (Hester, 1984). These social issues the ELLs face can create difficulties in learning the new language (Snow, 1992).

Other social issues the young ELLs have to face are related to personal identity and cultural identity (Snow, 1992). There is sometimes a lack of cultural identity and a negative ethnic pride. It is easy for the English language learner to develop these negative associations. This can happen as the ELL increases proficiency in English. Often, the ELL will choose to adopt Anglo-American language and culture in public and forego his/her native characteristics (Nero, 2005). The child begins to feel disconnected from the home language, culture, and family (Papatheodorou, 2007). These negative connections can sometimes be counteracted when the children have peers and adults from the same background to play and connect with (Meyer, Klein, & Genishi, 1994). Connecting and affiliating with others of the same language and background strengthens the native cultural identity and supports more positive perceptions (Nero, 2005). When children of similar backgrounds are not available, the deep and rich levels of play needed for early learning for young children can take much longer to achieve (Meyer, Klein, & Genishi, 1994). Teachers must work to implement practices that will help them to deeply understand and maintain their true identity beyond just language and academic ability (Hunter, 1997). This issue creates problems on social and linguistic levels because language is learned within culture (Garcia & Flores, 1986).

In addition to the problems listed above, Futrell, Gomez, and Bedden (2003) noted that in the self-appraisal study performed by the National Center for Educational Statistics the teachers admitted they were not well prepared for the challenges of the classroom and integrating skills for ELL student learning. Teachers that lack the

necessary skills may also misdiagnose ELL students that can function in social scenarios, which may lead them to believe that the student is proficient in English (Cummins, 1980). The research firmly supports the need for teachers to be able to acquire new skills to teach ELLs, understand the student's cognition related to instructional skills, and apply effective skills for teaching that will help the students achieve academically in multiple content areas (Renner, 2011). This has great significance because the population of ELL students has grown exponentially, especially in many of the eastern states across America (NCELA, 2011; Renner, 2011). Therefore a personnel shortage in teachers and administrators that can effectively interact with the ELL population has arisen, as reported by the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2003).

Han and Bridglall (2009) referenced the school itself as a problem for ELLs. They noted that schools that have crowded classroom space, lack sufficient educational resources and a responsive school climate may inadvertently support the failure of students that come from minority sub-groups. In retrospect there are national standards that each state must follow to identify and teach ELLs, but the states are given latitude in the interpretation and procedures for identification and teaching second language learners (Benavides, Midobuche, & Kostina-Ritchey, 2012). That process has created a scenario in which services offered vary by state and local education agencies.

The review of literature also demonstrated that the service delivery models can cause a problem for ELLs. The three prevailing ELL models used in the United States for service delivery are: 1) English as a Second Language (ESL) pull-out, 2) Transitional Bilingual, and 3) Dual Language.

The most widely used program is the ESL pull-out model. This model will be examined because it is the least effective and the most expensive (Benavides et al., 2012). The pull-out model requires extra resource teachers that have ESL credentials to remove students from their general education classrooms and meet for 30 to 45 minutes a day or longer. The students will miss their daily instructions in subject area content from the general education class, and the ESL teacher has limited time to meet with the general education teacher for planning and individualization. The model also lacks a component in which content integration and instruction is emphasized in learning for the ELLs.

The Transitional Bilingual model provides ELLs with instruction in their native language in all subject areas as well as instruction in English as a second language. The focus is to mainstream ELL students and help them convert to English instructions. The model is delivered based on a two-three year time frame, which is insufficient for academic purposes (Benavides et al., 2012). Due to the program's framework, it is perceived as being remedial and segregated.

The Dual Language model is designed to engage students with their native language as well as the English language in an inclusive environment. The students are given a curriculum in both languages to enrich their application and use of the target language. The classroom dynamics are changed to reflect collaborative learning in which ELLs help native English speakers to grasp the curriculum, and English speakers help ELLs to acquire the curriculum through English. The Dual Language model is cost efficient and has a reliable success rate.

The outcome of the service delivery models has an effect on

ELL academic learning because the delivery, time, language used, and population served is still subject to an administrative decision that if made improperly is problematic (Pica, 2000).

There are a number of challenges that ELLs face that may impede learning in a general education classroom. The challenges related to educating ELLs at the academic, social, teacher preparation, and school level have a major impact on teaching practices. Teachers have to manage a variety of learner needs that require specialized training and applications that have been found to be effective. Unfortunately the untrained teacher can quickly become overwhelmed and contribute to the disconnect between learner needs and pedagogy. Research has identified basic solutions to support teaching practices that are differentiated in nature and move pedagogy from homogenous to heterogeneous based on individual student needs.

BASIC SOLUTIONS

Researchers have been successful in identifying ways to improve teaching the ELL population in general terms. The solutions listed herein comprise programmatic, teacher, and research based classroom strategies. The solutions that have been identified may be used to scaffold the learning of the young ELL and influence the way specific strategies are taught within activities.

First, to help promote school success for the ELL it is helpful to start early by making use of a high quality early care and education programs. (Halle et al, 2012). Often, the opinion is that the children will improve in their English once they get to school through immersion and participation. Relying on this process has been found to be ineffective for learners (Kaplan & Leckie, 2009). There has been evidence in the research that children enrolled in high quality early learning programs foster school success for young ELLs at significant levels (NCELA, 2011). Enrolling the young ELL in a high quality early learning program will allow them to experience the new language in context, and be exposed to more English prior to enrolling in school (Yesil-Dagli, 2010). While making use of a high quality early learning program is a basic solution to promoting reading success in school for ELLs, it is necessary for those early learning programs to use research based best practices. The remaining solutions we discuss will revolve around this focus on what programs and teachers can do.

Programmatic Solutions

The programmatic environment refers to the atmosphere, curriculum, daily schedule and classroom routines. There are ten programmatic indicators of high quality that impact young ELLs that should be in place to support school success (Castro et al as cited in Halle et al, 2012). The factors are:

1. Organized and supportive environment. High quality environments are neat, organized, and supportive. Teachers can provide an attitude of support by placing labels in the child's native language as well as English around the classroom (Zehler, 1994). Additionally, structuring the environment and the routines so they are predictable gives the ELL an understanding of how tasks are to proceed and how to navigate the room. When the environment is supportive and predictable the learners

feel safe and can use their cognitive energy to process content and language rather than focusing on the environment.

2. Positive teacher and child interactions. High quality programs promote and demonstrate positive conversations and learning opportunities. Teachers maintain a pleasant demeanor while working with all children. ELLs can feel emotionally safe and enjoy the learning process because it is free from stress and pressure. Additionally, the interactions that teachers have with the children demonstrate care and respect, while educationally focused. Teachers can send these messages using smiles and soothing tones, when the language barrier is high.
3. Increased opportunities for peer interactions. Peer scaffolding can be very productive for supporting ELLs. High quality programs offer time and learning opportunities that support the use of peer interactions. Strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, and cooperative learning increase the opportunities for peer interactions in a structured way.
4. Strategic use of the child's first language. Support and maintenance of the young ELLs home language contributes to the learning of English (NAEYC, 1995). High quality programs have teachers that find ways to use the child's home language to display respect and provide scaffolding to increase first language proficiency. This allows the native language to serve as a frame of reference for the second language and the children become more willing participants in the learning process.
5. Explicit vocabulary instruction. Teaching vocabulary purposefully to young ELLs has a positive correlation with academic outcomes (Yesil-Dagli, 2011). High quality programs plan for purposeful and explicit vocabulary instruction. Instruction in vocabulary contributes to higher reading ability and school functioning.
6. Frequent ongoing assessment of the child's first language, second language, and other domains of development. A strong assessment program and appropriate assessment practices benefit ELLs because the teacher is aware of the effectiveness of instruction. High quality programs support these practices to ensure effective instruction for the ELL (NAEYC, 2005). Teachers use appropriate assessment strategies to gain an understanding of the child's current proficiency in the native and second language. Additionally, the teacher employs formal and informal means of collecting data in all developmental and academic areas.
7. Small group and one on one instruction. Small group and individual instruction allows the teacher to focus in on the needs and levels of each ELL. High quality programs provide many opportunities for this style of instruction through the use of group time activities and centers. This individualized instruction creates an avenue for needed differentiation to occur.
8. Program structure. The program structure refers to the organization of program delivery. High quality programs maintain a structure that is suitable to the learner as to

how the language instruction is delivered. Examples would be Dual Language or Bilingual, Pull-Out, or Push In English language instruction. When teaching young ELLs, high quality programs and best practices recommend bilingual education as the most effective model (Zehler, 1994).

9. Skilled teachers. High quality programs hire and utilize teachers with specialized training and preparation in working with ELLs. The teachers are prepared to support the unique learning needs of ELLs. Additionally, teachers receive ongoing training to build proficiency required for working with this population (NAEYC, 1995).
10. Family engagement. High quality programs put forth great effort to respect, involve, and educate the families of young ELLs (NAEYC, 1995; Zehler, 1994). When the family feels involved in the program, higher learning outcomes can be expected. Additionally, when children feel their family is respected, they are more likely to participate and be motivated to learn.

Teacher Solutions

Before exploration of what can happen in the classroom, examination of the teacher in general terms is needed. One of the challenges in working with ELLs is that teachers lack the confidence they need to serve the children with linguistically diverse needs (Renner, 2011). The basic solution for dealing with this particular challenge is to offer staff development to the teachers of young children. Training for teachers of young ELLs is limited in accessibility (Bell, 2010). When teachers of young ELLs receive training in working with linguistically diverse students, they can increase their confidence as well as learn theory and practice that will support them in their work (Renner, 2011). Most ELLs are in the mainstream classrooms and unfortunately, the majority of the teachers are not trained to successfully work with this population (Cho, 2011). With this information in mind, the basic solution that is common in the literature is for teachers to receive professional development and training in working with young ELLs. The teacher has to understand the developmental process of acquiring a new language, the stages involved, the socio-cultural aspects of learning a second language, and the technical aspects of language and language development (Cummins, 1979, 1980, 1981; Hakuta, 1986).

The majority of the ELL research available suggests the need for teacher training. However, there is little research about the types of training the teacher needs. Cho (2011) suggests that teachers need to be trained in content specific to working with young ELLs.

Classroom Practices

Young ELLs spend the majority of their time in the mainstream classroom. This means that general education teachers bear the responsibility for making content comprehensible for the child. Ability grouping within the classroom supports the ELL. It provides the opportunity for appropriate materials to be used with the students to better match their needs. Additionally, ability grouping increases the likelihood of quality interactions and increased participation (Cho, 2011).

Another aspect to consider in the classroom is to target language skill development. The activities and strategies that are

used can be designed to highlight those skills. The most important skills to emphasize with young ELLs are vocabulary, phonological awareness, and letter naming (Yesil-Dagli, 2010). This combination delineates the best predictors for oral reading fluency among ELLs. In order for these skills to be scaffolded appropriately, Cho (2011) indicated that the children need to have time engaged in high quality instructional strategies, the availability of an aide, and experienced teachers. The research supports that higher oral language skills results in fluent reading (Yesil-Dagli, 2010).

Finally, consideration of home language maintenance within classroom practices should be addressed. Young ELLs often experience native language extinction from being exposed to English so early (Fillmore, 1991). This phenomenon not only has devastating sociocultural results, but it also has a negative impact on English literacy and academics. The research strongly supports that when young ELLs receive instruction in the classroom in their native language in concert with English the academics improve (Burchinal et al., 2011). Though the highest outcome is shown when taught in English only if the child enters with low literacy skills in both languages, it is suggested that maintaining the home language is helpful.

CONCLUSION

Teacher preparation programs benefit new and upcoming teachers when they focus on specific understandings and strategies to support the young ELL in the early childhood program and classroom. A match is required between practices and children on two levels, the program and the classroom (Bell, 2010). Early childhood program administrators need to examine their ELL population and determine the bilingual program approach that would best serve their students (Baker, 2000). They can choose from ESL pull-out, Transitional Bilingual, or Dual Language. If the language of instruction is to remain strictly English, the administrator and staff must determine what home language supports will be put in place to maintain the young child's identity and linguistic diversity. Home language maintenance is important for the sociolinguistic factors mentioned earlier. It also prevents language extinction and disconnection between the children and their families common to young ELLs as they develop and age (Fillmore, 1991). The teachers within the individual classrooms must use specific knowledge gained through training and teacher preparation programs and match their practices to the needs of the young ELLs (Samson & Collins, 2012). When these matches are made, interaction and instruction can be maximized to both scaffold English and the content being shared with the young ELL. When teachers are adequately prepared with specific research based methods for matching understandings of ELL theories and strategies to the learning styles of their students, young ELLs can be given more effective instruction (Daniel & Friedman, 2005; Samson & Collins, 2012). More research is needed to: 1) determine the specific techniques and strategies that are most effective with young ELLs and 2) improve teacher preparation programs to include a concentrated focus on training the general practitioner in ELL practices.

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