

How Content-Based Learning Widens the Achievement Gap for English Language Learners

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Introduction

In passing the expiration date for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) – a program that protects some 700,000 immigrants, frequently referred to as ‘Dreamers,’ who were brought illegally to the United States as children – and of rising xenophobic attitudes towards those whose first language is not English, it is vital for educators and administrators to fabricate safe, comfortable environments for English Language Learners (ELLs). According to the U.S. Department of Education, ELLs are defined as individuals whose native language is a language other than English, and whose difficulties in understanding English may deny opportunity for success in academic achievement and societal participation (Education Commission of the States 2014). In Buffalo, NY, from the early 2000s onward, the influx of refugees in Erie County have originated from Burma, Somalia, Bhutan, and Iraq. Specifically, in terms of the children of immigrant and refugee families, the number of ELL students in Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) sharply increased from 2,539 in 2004 to 4,307 in 2014, with a total of 63 different languages across the district, according to Partnership for the Public Good (Fike, Chung, and Riordan 2015). In light of President Donald J. Trump’s commentary about undocumented immigrants not being people, but rather categorizing them as ‘animals’ (Davis 2018), it is key for districts like Buffalo Public Schools to provide a safe learning environment for all their students. In order to accomplish this, it is important for educators to empathize with the ELL students who have suffered from devastation and travesties: famine, civil war, persecution, natural disasters, etc. However, this population requires more attention, as refugees and immigrants are a small percentage in comparison to the second-generation. Contrary to common belief, the majority of ELLs are not international students, but rather natural-born citizens of the United States. Natural-born ELLs equally suffer the consequences of inadequate English as a New Language (ENL) education as their foreign-born peers due to the lack of language focus and differentiated instruction.

Despite the legal measures that ensure nondiscriminatory practices for this subpopulation – such as the Equal Protection Clause¹ – ELLs still lack fair assessments, accommodations, quality instruction and proper resources to remain competitive with their counterparts. For example, in 1982, *Plyler v. Doe* ruled that states cannot constitutionally deny students equal access to free public education on account of their immigrant status (“Public Education for Immigrant Students” 2017). However, a discrepancy remains between the definition of *equal* access, where every student receives the same resources, and *equitable* access, where every

¹ The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment has been an important concept in the law of public education, as it prohibits states from denying any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law (“Equal Protection” 2016).

student is provided the resources they need to be successful. This unfortunate reality raises an essential question of whether or not the U.S. education system is providing ELLs equitable opportunities for academic achievement with the current methods of instruction. In the midst of immigration policy debates, and of widespread mentalities of prejudice against those with different cultures, religions, languages, etc., effective education proves indispensable in permitting ELLs the chance to attain “the American Dream.” These students have the right to appropriate language-support within the classroom until they achieve English proficiency, as this allows for participation in all aspects of a school’s curriculum. The United States should therefore focus less on English-only content based instruction, and more on differentiating instruction for ELLs, as they deserve to be taught by dual-certified educators who strive to recognize the value of their students’ native language and culture through multiculturalism as to increase ELL students’ academic achievement and English proficiency.

Background

In the United States, the most common response to the increase in ELLs is content-based instruction (CBI), an approach to language learning focused heavily on content, and a crucial element of ENL education. According to the Migration Policy Institute, New York City Public Schools have the second highest in ELL student population in the United States (Soto et al. 2015) – 80.95% of students citywide are taught by Freestanding ENL, a “research based-program comprised of a stand-alone model and integrated ENL,” in which English academic language is the medium to convey content (New York Department of Education 2017, 28). In Buffalo Public Schools’ Bilingual Education Handbook, the Commissioner’s Regulations Part 154 requires: “Districts and schools engage all English Language Learners in instruction that is grade appropriate, academically rigorous, and aligned with the New York State [...] Common Core Learning Standards” (12). However, without proper support or training in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), content teachers struggle to properly implement appropriate strategies in ELL-heavy classroom. Without an ELL co-teacher, or the ability to properly incorporate differentiated instruction as to accommodate various types of students, English-only CBI negatively affects ELL students’ ability to gain English proficiency. Especially in the earlier stages of language development, ignoring students’ first language and culture as valuable tools to teach content ultimately forces ELL students to gradually trail further behind their academic counterparts, as they have difficulty meeting state standards. For example, according to New York State Education Department (NYSED), only 2% of English Language Learners in grades 3-8 were considered proficient this past year on the Regents English Language Arts Assessment; 4% of ELLs were proficient on the Regents Mathematics Assessment. In 2016, the average graduate rate in New York City Public Schools was at 70%, whereas only 27% of ELL students graduated. In the same year, the average graduate rate in Buffalo City School District was at 63%, whereas only 24% of ELL students graduated out of 231 students. Given the 2016 average graduation rate in NYS was at 80%, it is apparent how wide the achievement gap remains between ELL and non-ELL students with CBI (“NYC & BUFFALO PUBLIC” 2017).

In school districts like Buffalo Public Schools, who frequently report higher poverty rates², it is also challenging to execute CBI without adequate financial support. According to Sanchez (2017), “ELLs are often concentrated in low-performing schools with untrained or poorly trained teachers. The shortage of teachers who can work with this population is a big problem in a growing number of states.” Without appropriate funding from either state or local governments, lower-income districts cannot sufficiently provide for its ELL student population. For example, in what NYS describes to be an ‘integrated ENL classroom,’ where students receive core content area and English language development instruction, the curriculum is supposed to be “... taught by a teacher dually certified in the content area and ENL or are co-taught by a certified content area teacher and a certified ENL teacher” (“Integrated ENL Sources”). Other ELL program options that NYS suggests include either ‘Transitional Bilingual Education Programs’ or Dual Language Programs. However, these educational strategies, which require either co-teaching or the utilization of home language, are not included in the budget for districts like Buffalo Public Schools. How can one properly provide additional resources and assistance for ELL students if one must first overcome the economic disparity that exists within the education system?

Regardless of the economic standing of a school district, it is important for content teachers to be more adaptive in their methods of instruction. English-only content-based instruction, without support from an additional TESOL teacher or the use of students’ home language, bars ELL students’ ability to succeed in the United States education system and workforce, as it does not effectively increase their English language proficiency. Particularly in terms of meeting New York State standards and requirements for core subjects, such as Mathematics and English Language Arts, this proficiency is vital. On account of this deficiency, a viable alternative to diminish the achievement gap and increase language comprehension in ELL students is differentiated instruction: a framework for effective teaching that provides a diverse group of students with different avenues towards content-knowledge. Within a classroom, clear differences lie within the culture, socioeconomic status, language, gender, motivation, ability or disability and personal interests of the students; teachers must be aware of these varieties as they plan curriculum. By considering a wide spectrum of learning styles and needs, teachers can establish a more flexible curriculum through personalized instruction; this will ensure equal educational opportunities for all students, particularly ELLs.

Methodology

Outside of the quantitative data on the growing population of ELL students provided by the New York State Education Department, the majority of qualitative data that works to verify the consequences of content-based instruction in its current implementation, and the benefits of differentiated instruction, derives from relevant case studies and research. Additionally, support

² 82% of enrolled students in Buffalo City School District are economically disadvantaged (“NYC & BUFFALO PUBLIC” 2016).

also originates from a student's observational journal, which is based on her volunteer hours in a fourth-grade, ELL-heavy classroom at PS 93 Southside Elementary. Alongside the influx of foreign-born individuals in the United States – specifically in New York – there have been multiple studies centered on appropriate ELL education. For example, Delgado (2017) conducted research on the factors for success in a content-based ELL classroom, and found that sheltered instruction classrooms are not often led by educators unprepared to address the needs of ELLs; rather, they are “led by dually certified ELL and content educators who deliver grade-level material and focus on English acquisition simultaneously” (19). Identifying the Buffalo City School District as a prime example, school districts that service large numbers of ELLs do not have the budget required to maintain two professionals in all of the rooms where they can meet the developmental needs of English language. In an ideal situation, every district with a high percentage of ELL students would have the opportunity to be well-staffed with trained ELL educators to assist in lessening the achievement gap. However, as previously mentioned, ELL students are chronically placed in lower-income districts, most of which are forced to resort to a more cost-effective method: English-only instruction by content-teachers (Sanchez 2017).

Rather than attempting to alter this unfortunate reality, Delgado (2017) mentions one common thread essential to the academic success of ELLs: the sociocultural domain. This aspect of understanding student background is often lost in the frenzy of preparing students for standardized tests and standards. Taking purposeful strides towards learning about where students come from is not only feasible, but central for successfully differentiating instruction for ELLs. In Buffalo Public Schools for example, there are 63 different languages across the district, therein highlighting the wide range of cultural backgrounds in its student population. Just as classroom teachers, school administrators, and policymakers carry their cultural experiences and perspectives into their everyday lives – educational and personal – so do students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. As Delgado (2017) notes, “classrooms were successful when strong interrelationships were evident between language and content learning, efficient organizational structures, as well as a focus on the celebration of culture” (18), thus reinforcing the idea of a culturally-responsive pedagogy in order to better tailor the content for ELL students. Additionally, learning about students' sociocultural background increases teacher consciousness regarding the students' previous English-language education and experience, therein avoiding unnecessary assumptions about proficiency. According to David Farbman (2015), a report author from the National Center for Time and Learning: “it took [elementary] students three to five years to develop oral proficiency and four to seven years to develop what is known as ‘academic English proficiency,’ the more sophisticated application of language in formal contexts like analyzing texts or comprehending complex concepts” (5). In recognizing ELL students vary on this timeline towards gaining ‘academic English proficiency,’ the difficulty of using a single set of strategies through English-only content-based learning becomes incredibly clear. Differentiated instruction is considerably more empathetic towards different student backgrounds, as it allows teachers to help students who need heavier or lighter support while at the same time creatively instructing ELLs at the grade-level that will help them gain access to the

curriculum. Moreover, Itwaru Poorandai (2017) reports in her research on culturally and linguistically differentiated instruction for ELLs: “Constructivist pedagogy provides students the opportunity to become active, responsible individuals who can learn at their own pace based on their own ability level” (17). The lack of specificity in constructivist pedagogies is what allows it to adapt to the diversity within individual classrooms – it is flexible because this ideology centers on the construction knowledge and meaning from personal experiences. When a teacher practices constructivism in the classroom, by default it creates culturally-responsive lessons; ultimately, this leads to differentiated content that both engages and proves relevant for diverse learners with different culture and linguistic backgrounds. The intersections between sociocultural experiences, constructivism and differentiation create a learning environment with a high potential to narrow the gap between ELL and non-ELL students, as it acknowledges the importance of diversity within the classroom.

With more specific observances in elementary classrooms containing high numbers of ELLs across NYS, the need to reform current methods of instruction for ELLs becomes increasingly more apparent. For instance, Jacqlyne Thornton (2017) conducted a case study on teachers’ perceptions of English-only ELL instruction in a fourth-grade classroom, which coincide with Strade’s (2017) observations of ELL students in a fourth-grade classroom in Buffalo Public Schools. The case study was conducted as an online survey, completed by fourth-grade teachers in urban and suburban public-school districts across New York State; teachers who qualified taught ELL students as a homeroom or content area teacher through English-only instruction and possess a NYS teaching certification. The questionnaire the teachers completed online spoke to the challenges of English-only instruction and suggestions for improvement of ELL education, where 75% of participants agreed there were challenges with the current method, 50% requested more support to meet the needs of ELLs and 75% requested more time to plan lessons that incorporate strategies to better teach ELLs. The challenges listed in the responses to the questionnaire discussed a lack of research on specific ELL students, varied English-language knowledge of ELL students within classrooms, and the language barrier between parents and teachers (Thornton 2017). Similar challenges were echoed from Strade’s (2017) perspective while volunteering with fourth-grade ELL students in PS 93 Southside Elementary:

“... I am infuriated at... how quickly [teachers] push through the content. How... can I keep the small group of ELL students I work with up to speed amid presumptuous chaos? The teachers... assume that... the amount of time given to the rest of the class to learn a certain piece of material is sufficient – by default – for [ELL students]. There is a major lack of responsibility here... There needs to be recognition in that not every student learns the same way, and at the same speed... – this should be considered when creating plans of differentiated instruction, especially with ELLs” (8).

Lack of support, time, and training – these challenges frequently occur in classrooms of English-only content-based instruction, as the American education system narrow-mindedly envisions the

end goal of rigid national standards and English proficiency without first considering the logistics of the process. How can teachers accomplish this goal without first recognizing that a learner's ability to understand English language is critical for school success?

Professor Jim Cummins, one of the world's leading authorities in bilingual education and second language acquisition, seeks to highlight the complexities of ELLs learning English by recognizing the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). These distinctions were made in order to draw educators' attention to the timeline and challenges that ELLs must endure in their attempt to match their peers in academia. Cummins (2008, 71) states, "BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school." Naturally through social interactions, children develop the implicit and explicit language skills necessary to socialize with their peers, therefore "conversational English" or BICS. This type of language proficiency is harnessed by ELLs in non-academic settings, such as the lunch room, playground or school bus, and can fool educators into believing the child has "acquired English." However, though English language learners may speak the language in the hallway, this does not mean they have mastered the academic and cognitive language skills necessary for success in the classroom.

Due to this distinction between BICS and CALP, it is essential for teachers and administrators to be cognizant of each ELL student's development and timeline in mastering English. Both the case study questionnaire (Thornton 2017) and the student observation journal (Strade 2017) highlight differentiated instruction as a solution to better ELL-heavy classrooms. According to Thornton (2017), "Scaffolding (modeling or re-teaching), explicit vocabulary instruction, and visual aids were the most commonly used approaches" (#); more specifically, vocabulary explained by pictures or visuals, adapted texts, and the small group teaching model. The small group model was also commonly used in PS 93 Southside Elementary, as Strade (2017) frequently sat at the back table with a small group of ELL student to provide extra support. These small group atmospheres worked to increase student confidence – in reading, writing, asking questions, and working through in-class assignments. The opportunity for collaborative learning through small group activities not only aligns with student-centered learning, but also provides the prospect for ELLs to develop their English-speaking ability and build their social skills (Itwaru 2017).

Additional suggestions in Thornton's research first included more regular professional development on teaching strategies and practices for educating ELLs, particularly for content-teachers not certified in ELL/TESOL/etc.; second, more support from the district with translators for parent-teacher conferences, and additional time and relevant resources to develop thorough lesson plans to address the needs of ELLs. By professionally developing teachers' knowledge of ELL education strategies, increasing the amount of time teachers are allotted to plan for their lessons, adding additional support in the form of resources, and providing a translator to reach

the families of ELL students, educators will be more prepared to differentiate their instruction for ELL students. Differentiated instruction works to increase academic achievement and English proficiency as teachers reach out to parents of ELL students to gain a more comprehensible overview of their child's background, utilize additional time and resources within a culturally-responsive pedagogy and develop their understanding of the ELL population professionally within their district. As supported by recent research, a relevant case study and observations of an ELL-heavy classroom, the role of differentiated instruction and multiculturalism would better suit the needs of ELL students, specifically within lower-income districts, as it provides a cost-effective alternative to CBI through use professional development and district support.

Discussion

There is a wide selection of tactics to properly implement differentiated instruction in an ELL-heavy classroom specifically, depending on the needs of each student. Though New York State requires specific standards for ELL students per grade level, there is no clear consensus on how to adequately accomplish this goal within the classroom. Instead, the debate rages on, with a number of teacher blogs and websites that outline tips for ELL instruction as to ensure equity and fairness in academic success. For example, Alrubail (2016) provides a handful of equitable accommodations for ELLs on *Edutopia*, such as providing students a dictionary or thesaurus, translations, extra time on tests or quizzes, and alternative methods to understanding the curriculum, such as visual aids. Additionally, Alrubail (2016) suggests the following to increase language proficiency: “[...] effective English-language learning classrooms foster a strong environment of collaboration, dialogue, and group engagement. It's important that students have multiple opportunities throughout the day to engage in conversational-style learning with their peers so that they can practice their oral language skills.” The confinements of a traditional ‘textbook’ classroom will not efficiently work to improve proficiency, as it forces auditory learning without opportunity to verbally practice the language. Further, the use of native tongue can work to increase the cognitive development of ELL students, and thus improving their proficiency in English. Itwaru (2017) speaks to this in her observations of ELL teaching and learning strategies, noting: “Students who receive instruction in their first language demonstrated higher academic success. ELLs’ performance increased when the same test was administered in [their home language] ... students’ math and problem-solving skills increased with instruction in the familiar vocabulary, phrasing, and syntax of their primary language” (27). Clearly, the use of familiar speech, translations, and either a dictionary or thesaurus works to expand ELLs’ comprehension in a concise manner by incorporating home language(s) into the lesson (Alrubail 2016). Differentiating instruction with the use of non-English additionally creates a culturally-responsive classroom as previously discussed – a safe and welcoming environment for students of varying ethnicities, religions, languages, etc.

The sociocultural perspective of instruction is one of the first steps towards proper differentiation of teaching and learning in the classroom. It is therefore important for the teacher

to build a relationship with the students in the classroom, as to go beyond student data and records in learning about different experiences, background and needs. This may seem like an incredibly simple concept; but, without this essential piece of knowledge, educators cannot properly mold their teaching to the students. To further this notion, Rita Pierson (2013) gave a TED Talk regarding the value and importance of building relationships, particularly with students. In a rousing call to educators, Pierson (2013) says: “Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.” She notes in her talk that no significant learning can occur without relationships, as it works to link students and teachers to better adapt the classroom into a safe and comfortable learning space. Positive relationships are the foundation of any successful classroom and particularly one that includes ELLs. Educators must connect with their students and families in order to create lessons that engage them through their interests and goals, and to foster new learning. Within this development, teachers will also better recognize the literacy and language backgrounds of their students, especially by discovering past educational experiences, home environment, etc. Teachers need authentic evidence of what each of their students can do with content, language and literacy, rather than making assumptions about their ELLs progression towards ‘academic English proficiency’ through CBI. Taking the time to understand the spectrum of proficiency in the classroom creates an environment where teachers can effectively scaffold and support each student’s growth relative to the standards of the state (i.e. Common Core). Additionally, this will clarify the type of differentiation necessary within the classroom so that teachers can identify meaningful goals and objectives with students; this will ultimately permit better decisions regarding curriculum, instructional strategies, classroom management, assessment, and pacing.

Alongside the formation of valuable relationships with students, teachers can learn how to differentiate and accommodate ELLs in the classroom. In various case studies and recent research, as well as tips from veteran-teachers on educational blogs, the most common themes of adaption in classrooms with diverse learners include: visuals (video clips, images, etc.), hands-on projects, first language usage, modifications to speech or text (translated texts, simplified instructions, etc.), collaborative learning, and instructional technology. It is important to recognize these as examples of methods for teachers to properly differentiate instruction – specific accommodations for diverse learners fluctuate between classrooms, districts and states. It is the appreciation and recognition of diversity within the classroom that separates differentiated instruction from content-based instruction (CBI), as cultural awareness is what allows for creativity, growth, and development. Differentiated instruction embraces diversity and multiculturalism within an academic setting, which sparks ideas and relatable strategies for educators to narrow the achievement gap, increase proficiency, and encourage success within the learning process for ELLs.

Conclusion

ELL students face the unique learning challenge of developing skills and content mastery to meet NYS standards while simultaneously acquiring a new language, frequently without the assistance of their native language. According to Pearson's website on "English Language Learners" (2017), "By 2025, one in four public school students will be an English language learner." Given that ELLs are an incredibly fast-growing student population in public schools across the United States, providing equal educational opportunities for these students is a crucial investment in the future of the country. Alongside this population growth has emerged a mentality among educators, one that encompasses the idea that 'every teacher is a language teacher.' This implies that every educator must be prepared to teach a classroom with ELL students, regardless of training or certification – how can this be accomplished? Differentiated instruction works to level the playing field, as it does not maintain the rigidity of the traditional classroom; instead, it allows educators to step away from the constraints of the traditional classroom, and towards constructivism. It is a method which works to adapt the instruction to accommodate a variety of learning needs and to blend into the dynamic of a particular classroom, without altering the standards. Teachers who practice differentiation in the classroom design lessons based on students' learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, etc.), manage the classroom to create a safe and supportive environment, assess students' progress using formative assessment (think-pair-share, creative extension projects, etc.), and continually adjust content to meet students' needs. The implication of differentiated instruction is that it reaches the sociocultural aspect of students' background as to build upon prior experiences and knowledge. Unlike CBI, differentiated instruction does not utilize academic language as a medium for language development, particularly in a monolingual classroom; rather, it recognizes that ELL's home language can be a powerful resource to make notoriously complex content-area concepts comprehensible and to promote literacy development in English.

In the current climate of the Trump administration, its hostility severely impacting American attitudes towards foreign-born or non-English speaking individuals, it is more important than ever that educators unite to meet ELL students with support and solidarity, rather than unquantifiable expectations of immediate English proficiency through English-only instruction. In a nation founded by immigrants and refugees, the American attitude and expectation of foreign-individuals is not only unfair, but fails to recognize the beauty and potential of bilingualism in the education system. Strade (2017) notes this frequently in her observations of ELLs at PS 93 Southside Elementary: "[...] these students are linguistically talented... how can we ostracize [ELLs] for not knowing English well enough when they [are] bilingual? No wonder they are having such difficulty – it would be horrifying [to be] shoved into a higher-level class with only a minimal understanding of a language I just began learning a couple years ago" (5-6). Content-based instruction, particularly in monolingual classrooms that lack the necessary support of resources and faculty experienced in ELL education, unfairly assumes one method of language instruction will benefit all. This ignorance towards various

learning styles, cultural upbringings, education levels and experience is the true pitfall of CBI instruction, therefore resulting in a lack of English proficiency. In NYS – given its long laundry list of standards for students, teachers and districts alike – the lack of proficiency in ELLs due to the assumptions of CBI proves to be detrimental, particularly in the impressionable years of elementary school. Further, districts across NYS, regardless of economic status, must work to support teachers with ELL-heavy classrooms rather than permitting teacher unpreparedness to increase students' lack of proficiency. In order to lessen the widening achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL learners, it is vital for educational reform to center on professional development to train educators on differentiated instruction for ELL students, on culturally-responsive pedagogies that permit collaborative learning and constructivist ideologies within the classroom, and making necessary accommodations for ELLs. Differentiated instruction is therefore an alternative adaption to the needs of the expanding ELL subpopulation, as it ensures these students equitable access to important academic content and successful completion of core subjects through valuable learning opportunities that content-based instruction simply cannot provide

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