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The Impact of English-Only Legislation on Teacher Professional Development: Shifting Perspectives in Arizona

Language minority students represent an increasing percentage of the school-age student population in the United States. Because the number of English language learners (ELLs) is on the rise nationwide, some states have enacted English-only legislation that impacts the educational experiences of ELLs and the teachers who work with them. Many teachers are now responsible—for the first time—for the linguistic and academic success of this student population; therefore, many states and districts have mandated teacher training. The authors’ work as co-staff developers over the past 7 years has highlighted the cyclic trends of teachers attending the workshops and the need to maintain a positive stance and ground training sessions in real classroom practices and experiences. As such, the interactive Structured English Language (SEI) training deepens the professional knowledge and strengthens the instructional skills of all certified teachers who attend the workshops and training sessions.

According to the 2000 Census, more than one out of every seven children between the ages of 5 and 17 speaks a language other than English at home. More than one third of these students are classified as ELLs (English language learners) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). The enrollment of the number of ELLs in urban schools increased
by 104.3% between the years 1989 and 2000, yet school enrollment in general for the same time period only increased by 13.6% across the nation (NCBE, 2000, cited in Minaya-Rowe, 2004). Several states, such as Arizona, addressed the increase in the number of ELL students in classrooms through legislation.

Prior to 2000, approximately 30% of Arizona’s ELL students were in bilingual programs in which Latino/a students’ native language was used in conjunction with English in order to develop both academic and language proficiencies (Keegan, 1999; Mahoney, Thompson, & MacSwan, 2004). Additionally, students in bilingual programs were taught by teachers with specialized training and endorsements that enabled them to better meet the diverse needs of ELL students. In November 2000, Arizona voters approved Proposition 203 (English Language Education for the Children in Public Schools). Proposition 203 stated that “all children shall be placed in English language classrooms” (A.R.S. §15-752); thus, all public schools were required to adopt and implement Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs for their students who are ELLs. In an SEI program, instruction is in English only, but is adapted to meet students’ developing language proficiency needs.

Consequently, ELL students were no longer placed in bilingual programs with specialized teachers; instead, ELLs were scattered throughout mainstream classrooms. As a result, the majority of public school teachers began working with ELL students—some for the very first time. Many teachers did not feel adequately prepared to meet the academic and linguistic needs of this student population (Combs, Evans, Fletcher, Parra, & Jimenez, 2005). Thus, in early 2005 as a response to these concerns, Arizona’s Department of Education began to require “an SEI, ESL, or bilingual endorsement for all classroom teachers (elementary, secondary, career and technical education and special education) supervisors, principals and superintendents” (Administrative Code R7-2-613, 2006). The new SEI endorsement consists of 60 hr of coursework. Coursework centers on strategies that are effective for ELL students, as well as language acquisition theory and a historical/political overview of bilingual education and legislative requirements. To promote completion of an endorsement, legislators developed a three-phase timeline. Certification requirements mandated that 15 hr of the endorsement needed to be completed in phase one, and the remaining 45 in phase two. Phase three applies only to teachers certified after 2006 and teachers new to the state of Arizona. For these groups, an additional 30 hr is required. Endorsement curricula were developed at the state level for the provisional endorsement earned in phase one, the full endorsement obtained in phase two, and the augmented endorsement of phase three. Education professionals were required to obtain their provisional endorsement by August 31, 2006, their full endorsement by August 31, 2009, and have 3 years after receiving state certification to obtain an augmented endorsement.

Shifts in Perspectives

The two authors are public school teachers, and have been for the past 15 years. During the past decade, we have had multiple opportunities to work with teachers through professional development sessions. Our work with educators in our own district and throughout the state reflects the political and legislative shifts of the past decade. We initially resisted the SEI instructional requirement for two primary reasons: It ignores the value of a child’s native language and the benefits of incorporating native languages into instruction, and it facilitates a false notion that to work effectively with ELLs, teachers only need 60 hr of training—less than two courses at the university level. This devalues the highly specialized role of bilingual and ESL teachers. However, in spite of our initial reluctance, we realized we were in a unique position that allowed us to develop positive learning experiences for teachers in our district who were now responsible—for the first time—for the linguistic and academic success of English language learners.

Thereafter, in 2002 we began to provide—as co-staff developers—workshops for educators in order to meet the needs of teachers and students in SEI programs. For a 2-year period,
we utilized the instructional framework of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2007) to guide our staff development. Initially, we worked with small groups of teachers and administrators who were concerned about the instructional needs of ELL students in their classrooms and schools. Educators took our 18-hr course during the summer or during monthly district professional development Wednesdays. Although the number of participating teachers was small, there was a high level of involvement and a desire to improve instruction for ELLs.

The approach of the state’s deadline for the 15-hr provisional endorsement resulted in a shift in the number of workshops and participants. Rather than 10–15 teachers and administrators, we began working with groups as large as 60 teachers. The profile of the participating teachers also shifted. In addition to content area teachers, responsible for the language and literacy development of all students, including ELL students, we now had counselors and other teachers who did not directly work with ELLs. We also felt a shift in the attitude of the participants. Although the majority of participating teachers remained motivated and engaged, there were those who were resentful and reluctant. Because the endorsement was mandated for all certified education professionals, such as counselors, some participants did not see the relevance of the training to their particular role in the school. We also began noticing a growing disconnect between the endorsement’s prescribed curriculum and the professional assignments of some of our participating teachers.

After the deadline for the first phase of the provisional certification passed, we relied on the state’s curricular framework to develop a 45-hr institute for the attainment of the full endorsement. As the deadline for the full endorsement approached, our staff development sessions again consisted of educators who were primarily responsible for the academic and literacy progress of ELL students of varying proficiency levels in their classrooms and schools. Throughout the planning of the 45-hr course together, we collaborated to co-construct a definition of best practices for a diverse student population, and ELL students in particular. Although we were the experts in regards to language acquisition and working with language minority students, the experiences and ideas of the educators with whom we were working contributed to the richness and effectiveness of our professional development sessions.

One of the most challenging aspects as workshop leaders—but one we were rather successful in overcoming—was occasional unproductive misconceptions from some participants toward immigrant students, and their reluctance to learn about a topic they knew so little about (second language acquisition). Not unlike many educational policy makers, these participants were often staunchly ideologically motivated, and were willing to ignore the research on second language development. The misconceptions about second language development—especially among secondary teachers—did not surprise us; given the lack of academic knowledge and professional development available to single-subject secondary teachers (Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). What did surprise us, however, was the degree to which some participants held such strong ideological views. For example, although we continuously presented students’ first language as a resource, rather than as a problem (Jimenez, Garcia, & Pierce, 1996; Rubinstein-Avila, 2006; Ruiz, 1984), some participants seemed to stubbornly hold on to the unsubstantiated ideas that they brought with them, such as it was best not to let students’ first language interfere with their English development. Some strongly believed—in spite of the evidence to the contrary—that students’ reliance on recognizing cognates, (i.e., relying on their knowledge of their first language) would only confuse them, and/or keep them from learning English.

As the deadline for all teachers in the state of Arizona to attain the full endorsement nears, we are experiencing another shift among participating teachers. The forced nature of mandated trainings often results in displays of resistance and reluctance. It is our challenge to modify and adjust our sessions within the constraints of the state’s curricular framework so that participating
educators perceive a high degree of relevance and productive dialogue among educators can ensue.

We strive to highlight the positive in our state-required SEI workshop, even though a sector of our district’s teachers still view the workshop as an extreme inconvenience and disruption to their specific professional development needs, as well as to their private time. Having had a multitude of negative workshop experiences, we approached the design of our SEI workshop from the perspective of wanting to provide teachers with a professional development experience they would actually refer to. Because we act in two very distinct capacities in our district, as classroom teachers and as staff development trainers, we feel we have a very unique perspective that most outside professional development trainers may not necessarily possess. We are in a position to work continuously on, and perfect, each of the instructional and learning strategies we promote in our training. Thus, we have created our workshop with the idea of providing teachers with a surplus of instructional tools they would want to call on when they plan their lessons and reflect on the kinds of academic opportunities that would best fit the needs of their own student populations. One of our primary goals for the workshop is to create long-term effects on teachers’ perceptions, their classroom practice, and student learning.

**Workshop Design and Implementation**

As we planned our workshop components, we had one foot firmly planted in the theory behind second language acquisition and best practices for ELLs, and the other foot firmly planted in the day-to-day reality of the teaching contexts found in our school district. As district teachers and district SEI professional development trainers, the design of our workshop has been influenced by our vision of what effective teaching, learning, and professional development should look like. Although our workshop focuses on the academic needs of ELLs, we have designed our professional development experience in such a way that teachers are able see the benefits of the knowledge and strategies we present for all students, regardless of language and skill abilities. Our SEI workshop is an attempt to continuously improve our district’s professional development practice so that the level of student achievement is ultimately raised for ELL students.

Often the affective filter level (Krashen, 1985) is so high, that ELL students feel uninvited to participate or to take risks. We advocate for the disappearance of fixed rows of desks and the ability for students to move only during prescribed times. Further, we focus on supporting teachers in their ability to provide instructional input that is comprehensible and is provided in a low anxiety environment (Krashen, 1985).

Our workshop reflects the fact that the growth in our state’s, as well as the nation’s, ELL student population has added to the need to have all teachers, not just those who plan to teach ESL classes, effectively prepared to address the unique language and academic needs of a rich and diverse student population. The demands placed on teachers of ELLs are great, if not overwhelming at times. Teachers must acquire a high level of content area knowledge coupled with the pedagogy that enables ELLs to access rigorous grade level curriculum. Additionally, teachers of ELLs must possess a strong understanding of the language acquisition process (Echevarria et al., 2007). We realize the ability for all ELLs to succeed academically is directly related to a teachers’ knowledge and abilities to deliver effective pedagogy during instructional time (Minaya-Rowe, 2004) and our workshop seeks to specifically address this idea. As such, we strive to make our workshop relevant to all teachers who attend regardless of grade-level and content area.

At the core of our SEI workshop lie some shared beliefs regarding the kinds of professional development experiences that most teachers value and that positively impact student achievement. These beliefs include:

1. Effective professional development experiences need to have all students and their
learning as their foundation, not just those who are privileged or talented.

2. Teachers of all content areas have specialized and unique kinds of knowledge that must be continually developed throughout their professional development experiences.

3. The content of any professional learning experience must come from both inside and outside the teachers involved, as well as from both research and practice.

4. Teachers acquire new knowledge by constructing it for themselves.

5. What teachers already know influences their learning and needs to be validated throughout the professional development process.

6. Professional development experiences need to provide teachers with a range of instructional and learning strategies that address the learning needs of all students.

To achieve this, we have designed an interactive, and highly participatory, workshop that highlights dialogue as an absolute necessity for the social and academic growth of students, as well as for the professional development growth of the teachers. It is also through dialogue that we hope to encourage teachers to create instructional atmospheres that motivate students to ask the questions they need to ask, the kinds of questions that will drive the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students. We engage teachers in the kinds of strategies that enable them to play the roles of both teacher and student. These strategies provide structure, but also allow the participants to design, negotiate, and mediate their own responses (Harste & Short, 1988; Pradl, 1996; Short & Pierce, 1990) so that learning is authentic, the affective filter is low, and participation from all students is invited and encouraged. Strategies such as chalk-talk, consensus boards (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1996), student choice, Sketch-to-Stretch (Harste & Short, 1988), Say Something (Harste & Short, 1988) Socratic seminar, and headline posters (Echevarria et al., 2007) provide dialogical experiences for participants as well as structure for the participants to respond. They also allow participants to create the content of their responses which in turn allows their true natures to be shown.

Through the course of the workshop, teachers participate as students in each of the strategies so they can see, feel, hear, and understand the instructional implications of each strategy. For example, during the portion of our training that highlights effective assessment of ELLs, teachers are asked to become experts on an alternative form of assessment. Teachers work in small groups to create a mini-lesson regarding their specific reading after they have individually completed an anticipation/reaction guide. Afterwards, teachers move to new groups to teach their specific alternative assessment. The final product consists of a large visual representation containing the information from each teacher’s mini-lesson. We call this a teaching mural. By working with professional knowledge content, coupled with instructional strategies for classroom use, teachers have a clearer understanding of how and why each strategy can increase student achievement among ELLs.

During each workshop session, teachers are seated in small groups so that dialogue regarding the use and implementation of each strategy is cultivated. Teachers have multiple opportunities throughout each workshop to consider and reflect on how each strategy can be adapted to their particular content area and teaching style. Part of the dialogue consists of teachers analyzing strategies for each of the four domains language. We encourage and emphasize this part of the dialogue so that the unique language development of ELLs is made explicit to the teachers. By taking an active role by participating in each instructional strategy, teachers feel more comfortable with returning to their own classrooms and taking instructional risks that will ultimately make them more effective in working with their ELLs.

There are some key primary characteristics of our workshop that lay the foundation for the kinds of experiences we provide teachers. Through the workshop, we strive to support teachers in their efforts to make connections between existing ideas and new ones. We do this by providing teachers with numerous opportunities to actively engage, discuss, and reflect
on their learning so that we challenge existing ideas and support them in the construction of new ones. In this way, we help to challenge teachers’ current thinking by producing and helping them to resolve dissonance between new ideas and current ones, especially as they relate to ideas and beliefs regarding ELLs and their learning. Further, we situate teachers’ learning in familiar contexts, and we help teachers to develop a wide range of instructional strategies that truly address learning for all student populations, in particular their language minority students.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Our experiences illustrate the complex effects of legislated, mandated professional development. On the one hand, many teachers statewide have an opportunity to participate in quality professional development experiences in response to the changing demographics and instructional needs of their student population. On the other hand, we recognize that change can be hard and is often a long and complicated process for many teachers.

Through our dual roles as both practicing classroom teachers and SEI professional development trainers, we bring a very unique—but often overlooked—perspective to our SEI workshop, that of practicing middle school classroom teachers who teach language minority students in an English-only state. We convey a realistic viewpoint to the work we do with teachers in that we understand the complexities involved in the day-to-day instruction of ELLs.

Although we recognize that the state required curriculum for our SEI workshop is not directly applicable to all teachers in all teaching contexts, it has proven valuable for the majority of teachers who are responsible for the linguistic and academic progress of language minority students across the district. In a final reflection and evaluation, one teacher stated, “I honestly believe that this training has allowed me the opportunity to not only validate some of the strategies I already use in the classroom, but also build a bigger toolbox from which I can draw as I rethink teaching strategies, lesson delivery, and assessments.” District administrators have attested to the efficacy and value of the SEI training as they often report seeing many of the workshop strategies being implemented in classrooms by teachers who strive daily to better facilitate their students’ academic success. As such, a few principals have taken an increased interest in the academic progress of their ELL student population by seeking out our assistance and asking us to work more directly with themselves and individual teachers at their respective school sites.

Our initial resistance of the state mandates regarding the instruction of language minority students has shifted to a positive stance. The required training has provided us an opportunity to contribute to teachers’ professional knowledge, and expand their instructional practices so that language minority students are continually included in classroom learning. As another teacher wrote, “It has given me loads of strategies to use that are effective and fun for all students. It has also given me a better understanding of my ELL students and the process they have to go through to learn.” We chose to take advantage of this situation to create a venue in which to discuss language acquisition theory and research, as well as best practices for ELLs.

For those district administrators, principals, and teachers in other states who may be faced with mandated training to meet the needs of language minority students, we suggest the following: take a positive, not a defensive, stance; change opinions through dialogue, not argument; modify instruction through demonstration, not lecture; and emphasize the value of language as a resource and as a right, not a problem to be fixed. Furthermore, when possible, districts should provide multiple training opportunities for their principals and teachers as a way to develop a common dialogue, shared practices, and a community of support and resource. Meeting the social and academic needs of language minority students is a new challenge for many educators across the nation. Although state mandates are often viewed with resistance, they can be a valuable opportunity to support both teachers and students.
References


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