Shifting Paradigm in Addressing Literacy Needs Of Adolescent English Language Learners

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Abstract
Currently, there is a polar shifting of an educational framework that attempts to address the learning needs of students across the nation. For so many years, due to accountability issues, there has been an overrepresentation in special education by English language learners (ELLs). This was in part because of the way policymakers and educators viewed students. Students have been viewed as having deficiencies if they do not learn the material that their teachers are teaching. This stance does not take into account the environment of the child. In many cases, students did not receive effective instruction and sufficient interventions before referral to special education. Response to Intervention (RTI) is one way that policy makers are asking educators to correct this trend. In addition, research has demonstrated that pedagogy for ELLs must take into account their cultural and social needs. Therefore, teacher practices should validate diversity.

Recently, there has been a growing concern about the reading proficiency of adolescents. Data from two national reports released in the 1980’s, A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and The 1984 Report Card from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1985), have provided statistics about the literacy crisis taking place in adolescents. A Nation at Risk reported that 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States may be considered functionally illiterate, and that minority youth may possibly have an illiteracy rate of as high as 40 percent. This report also stated that the average achievement of standardized testing at the high school level was lower than it was three decades ago. The 1984 Report Card from the National Assessment of Education Progress reported that 13 and 17-year-olds’ reading levels had not increased since 1971 (Jacobs, 2008). Today’s young people are facing a more complex world economy. The workforce that is in demand by the labor market needs to know how to problem solve and communicate effectively (Levy & Murnane, 2004). Workers are expected to have an adequate proficiency level in mathematical, verbal, and technological literacy (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2005). In order for these young people to be employable, they must have proficient literacy skills.
As the illiteracy rates in young people increase, in particular among adolescent Hispanic students, it will be imperative that schools implement effective instructional programs in reading to address this national crisis. National statistics have indicated that the reading comprehension abilities in more than six million middle and high school students were below the basic reading levels. Many experts are calling this the “adolescent literacy crisis” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). In addition, 96 percent of eighth graders who are English Language Learners (ELL) received below level scores in the reading section of the National Assessment for Education Progress. English Language Learners have a higher probability of dropping out of high school and earning lower wages than non-ELL students after graduation from a secondary school (Neugebauer, 2008). Thus, the adolescent literacy crisis needs to be addressed by policymakers and educators to assist ELL students in literacy development.

Institutions need to provide ELL students with effective literacy programs that will accommodate their learning needs and capitalize on their assets to promote proficiency in reading. Current research and theoretical underpinnings that sustain the construct of academic English language (AEL), the language proficiency that is needed to be successful in content areas, must be taken into account. The AEL skills of ELL pupils determine the academic success that they will have in school (Neugebauer, 2008).

In a book called The Best for our Children: Critical Perspectives on Literacy for Latino Students, Maria de la Luz Reyes and John J. Halcon include numerous authors that write about issues, theories, and practices of literacy that systematically exclude Hispanic students from traditional academic learning. These authors offer alternative and inclusive strategies that have been successful with Hispanic student learning. This book is organized into three general themes. Part one deals with socio-cultural, socio-historical, and socio-political context of literacy. Part two has to do with biliteracy, hybridity, and other literacies. It focuses on issues for language minorities and the use of language dominance, taking into account critical pedagogy and cultural-historical perspectives. Part three has a collection of literacy stories, linguistic code reflections, and expressions from Hispanic parents. One of the stories describes a girl who is at risk of being placed in Special Education because of her reading abilities. She represents the Hispanic student who is systematically excluded from the curriculum because of her language deficiencies and cultural identity (Reyes & Halcon, 2002).

In the past, programs used to address the instruction of ELLs was based on a deficit model approach, in which students’ challenges to learning were viewed as deficiencies in the child instead of inadequacies in the child’s environment (Goldberg, Rueda, & August, 2006). The Deficit Theory according to McDermott (1993) assumes that children acquire their competencies from their language and culture. Because of this, some children are viewed as lacking as opposed to limitations in their surroundings (McDermott, 1993). Hence, this leads to identifying learning problems within the child. Efforts for change are misdirected at the students rather than at the schools. Social-cultural contexts and pedagogy must be examined, in order to have a positive outcome (Neugebauer, 2008).

One of the recent initiatives by the federal government in response to literacy needs and concerns about the practice of over-identifying students for referral to special education programs is the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. Two laws support RTI, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). IDEA allows schools to use up to 15 percent of special education funds to provide early intervention for students who are struggling.
RTI is considered to be another option to the inadequate process of referring and identifying students with specific learning disabilities according to this law. NCLB authorizes schools to give students who did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP), which is an achievement measure determined by results on the state-level standardized exams, supplementary educational services (SES) (Samson, 2009). RTI came about as a result from research in learning disabilities (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004) and early reading intervention (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). This has had an impact on legislation at the federal level and teacher practices (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole 2008).

RTI makes an attempt to correct the deficit model approach, in that its basis is that failures in learning are not the child’s fault, but deficiencies in the child’s environment. This framework expects educators to provide effective instructional practices and supervise the progress of their students. Teachers are to provide interventions to those pupils who do not progress adequately. This is referred to Tier One of the RTI model. Students who still do not progress in an adequate fashion in the classroom will become part of the Tier Two intervention process. Tier Two interventions may include supplemental educational services, such as tutoring, research-based interventions, or support from a reading specialist. For those students who did not make sufficient progress with the Tier Two intervention, Tier Three support will be given to these students. Tier Three services include specifically planned instruction and/or an individualized education program (IEP), which falls under special education services (Samson, 2009).

This three tier process helps to calm some concerns that the special education community has about the overrepresentation of English Language Learners (ELLs) in special education programs. In many instances, ELLs had not received effective teaching practices or interventions before being referred to special education services. Furthermore, three initiatives mentioned the issues that deal with identification of learning disabilities, including the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), the Learning Disabilities Summit sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (2001) of the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

RTI is one way that school districts are trying to comply with the accountability requirements that have been placed by the NCLB. It is forcing schools to stipulate for whom, when, and how to implement scientifically researched curriculum programs and effective teaching practices, with intervention purposes in mind (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008). This framework assists in the navigation of educators as they consider how to recognize students having difficulty and how to intercede in providing three levels of interventions. RTI provides the means by which curriculum programs can be evaluated for effectiveness, minimizes giving up hope on a child after one intervention, and helps schools to move in the positive direction of trying different and more intense strategies to assist in the learning of students. RTI makes sure that these external factors are evaluated before presuming that a child has a learning deficit (Samson, 2009).

RTI is a framework that is transforming the way we support the learning of students in the classroom. It ensures that all learners have access to a quality education, especially those who may not receive needed assistance. This model requires general education teachers to check students’ progress and provide needed support to ensure adequate progress. It also requires special education teachers to provide services to general education students. Educators will need to continuously evaluate student progress, curriculum programs and teacher practices to make sure that they are addressing the needs of their students.
Educators must be prepared to teach a diverse population of students. In many cases, minority students have been taught with traditional pedagogy. This pedagogy has been evolving in the last thirty years to address pupils from a variety of backgrounds. We tend to teach the way we were taught. But, statistics and national reports have indicated that students are not performing as they should. There is poor performance in reading, language, and math. Schools also have high drop-out rates among minority students. In the last two years, the schools have been mainstreaming resource students back to the regular classroom. The government directed schools to instruct students at grade level. Also, ELLs have been more quickly mainstreamed from English as a second language (ESL) classes to regular classes (Yoon, 2008). Students in these classes, as well as other content area classes, need sufficient support to be academically successful.

Educators have addressed the learning and progress of English Language Learners (ELLs) through Bilingual Education and ESL programs. Unfortunately, sometimes these programs have not been implemented appropriately and consistently. With a continual influx of immigrants, our nation and schools must be at the cutting edge of research to assist in the academic and literacy development of ELLs. Up until recently, policymakers and educators have adhered to a deficit model approach. Students are classified as “at-risk” and are labeled as such and as an “ELL”. This process allows educators to focus on the students’ deficiencies instead of their competencies. Neugebauer reviews two books, Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners and The Language Demands of School: Putting Academic English to the Test, that brings to the forefront the need to revisit the interventions used on ELLs and consider new structural reforms.

This qualitative research was guided by the ethnographic approach. It is about ELLs and the obstacles they encounter as a group in learning literacy skills and academic English language (AEL), a term used to define the difference between reading difficulty in subject areas and limited language proficiency. The study of this culture-sharing group describes the manner in which the school system has responded to the learning needs of ELLs. The author notes that these two contributions bring attention to systematic changes that will assist in improving the literacy skills for ELLs. Pedagogy, policy, and assessments play an important role in this according to Double the Work and The Language Demands of School (Neugebauer, 2008).

Neugebauer analyzes the data by describing the deficit model approach and how using it has brought about educational shortcomings for ELLs, including blaming the students for not meeting academic standards. In Double the Work, challenges facing ELLs include inconsistency in identification, tracking, and testing students over a timeline. It also mentioned the need for flexibility in programs, professional development for educators, the use of effective teaching strategies, and to have a consensus on research needed. The authors of The Language Demands of School explain how AEL skills have a direct correlation with academic achievement and that academic language assessments will demonstrate if a student is ready for the content curriculum. This piece of work shows how more research on AEL abilities is necessary, in order for testing, instruction, and staff development to be consistent and support the development of the AEL skills in ELLs (Neugebauer, 2008).

In The Language Demands of School, the authors have a concern about categorizing all ELLs into one group. These students differ in their AEL skills, years of schooling, and how long they have been in the United States. Having an ecological approach welcomes diversity and leads educators to use flexibility in program implementation and AEL as explained in Double the Work.
Some of the flexible programs include longer school years, year-round schooling, extending the hours each day, adding another year(s) to high school, Saturday tutorials, internships, and distant learning (Neugebauer, 2008).

Neugebauer also points out that although reading readiness assessments take place in the primary years, tests in the upper grades are basically for yearly achievement and are not appropriate literacy and language assessments. In Double the Work, authors explain that federal policies do not address the separate issues of language proficiency levels, number of school years, etc. that have an impact on students’ academic performance. They recommend language proficiency exams to be given over a consistent timeline to monitor the progress of ELLs (Neugebauer, 2008).

In reviewing these two works, Neugebauer stipulates that they promote ecological changes, but they do not explicitly state that they do. Therefore, they fail to question the deficit model approach. In so doing, researchers, policymakers, and educators may continue using the deficit paradigm, which focuses on the deficiencies of the students instead of the educational institutions and pedagogy. Research is needed to illustrate the meeting point of all the factors that affect literacy skills and language development in ELLs towards roads that lead them to experiencing higher proficiency levels and academic achievement (Neugebauer, 2008).

The author clearly highlighted the need to reconsider interventions used on ELLs and to make new structure reforms. The use of the deficit model approach only undermines the good intentions that educators have. It blames the student for their lack of skills instead of considering the environment or circumstances in which the child has had to deal with. Neugebauer reviewed Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners and The Language Demands of School: Putting Academic English to the Test. Interventions and structure reforms were mentioned from both of these works. He does mention that there must be a paradigm shift from individual to context and from deficit to enrichment (Neugebauer, 2008).

It is evident that more research is needed in this area, where various factors must be considered to design an appropriate and equitable plan to develop the literacy skills and academic achievement of ELLs. There is a need to recognize and validate diversity in order to change our way of thinking to find more creative ways to educate ELLs. The ecology of human development promotes the importance of environmental factors and change over a period of time. It considers the outside influences upon a child’s life, including family, schools, communities, and culture. This approach helps us to understand the contextual factors that affect students, including mainstream values and standards (Neugebauer, 2008).

Neugebauer used Double the Work and The Language Demands to do content analysis to address better ways to assist in the learning of literacy skills and AEL. He described how ELLs are viewed in school settings as being deficient. There is a need to improve intervention programs and provide greater flexibility in scheduling and assessments. Pedagogy and professional development are very important as well in driving literacy skill and academic achievement to a higher level (Neugebauer, 2008).

It is crucial that policymakers and educators understand that ELL students need to be viewed as part of an ecological system. This will validate students’ diversity and will take into account the various factors to plan more effective strategies to reach these students. The author is successful in showing us those interventions and structural reforms must be challenged to better improve literacy skills and AEL in ELLs (Neugebauer, 2008).
In order to address the needs of ELLs, teachers’ roles should include language issues and the students’ cultural and social needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the past, educators have concentrated on meeting the language needs of ELLs. Taking the linguistic-only view limits the teacher from recognizing that ELLs need to have access to a variety of learning opportunities. It also keeps us from seeing how the teacher and the students position themselves in the classroom when interaction is taking place (Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006). Positioning theory is referred to “the study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting” (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999, p.1). This concept helps researchers and educators to understand the dynamics of social interactions: how individuals position themselves in a particular context and how they are positioned by others within the same context (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999).

Intentional self-positioning (also called reflexive positioning) is when a person views their surroundings from a certain position. This self-positioning guides the manner in which an individual acts, thinks about their roles, assignments, responsibilities, etc. in a specified context (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). Educators may position themselves as educators for all students, while others might view themselves as content area teachers. Depending on the position that the teachers take, it will guide them as they interact with their students (Yoon, 2008).

Interactive positioning, “in which what one person says positions another” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p.48), is the other type of positioning that occurs. It positions persons in ways in which it limits or extends what they say or do (Adams & Harre, 2001). If individuals are seen as knowledgeable in a certain field or work, they will be given the opportunity to make contributions to a discussion in that area, but if they are seen as incompetent they will not be given the chance to participate (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). According to Harre and Moghaddam (2003), people who are positioned deficiently may be denied the right to correct their cognitive performance, while those persons who are positioned as knowledgeable may be allowed to improve their performance.

Thus, it is imperative that educators use pedagogy that addresses the cultural and social needs of students. Content area teachers must view themselves as “conductors”, in which they take responsibility to maximize students’ learning, rather than “referral agents, in which they shift certain responsibilities to other teachers (Ladson-Billing, 1994). Teachers should strive to help students be academically successful, culturally competent, and socio-politically critical (Yoon, 2008).

As a nation, we have the inclusive goal of educating groups that have been historically underrepresented (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005). The government has addressed the learning of students through laws passed, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Educators have addressed their student population by adhering to state mandates, which include high stake testing in subject areas and testing the language development of English Language Learners (ELLs). It is evident that the demands placed on educators have increased in the past few decades. A growing concern for both, teachers and administrators, is the use of effective instruction to assist in the learning of students with diverse backgrounds.

Some ELLs have had difficulty in developing their literacy skills. A study was done on Latino middle school students in a Midwestern urban school who demonstrated low literacy skills, using literature-based cognitive strategy instruction. It was important for the researchers to develop rapport with the three students, in order to gain their trust. Familiar objects, such as corn and tortillas, were placed on a table so that the students could respond by having a conversation about these items. Students were asked to write about these objects or experiences that related to
these objects. This teaching method was referred to as the language experience approach. The students’ writing was typed and a printed copy was used as a starting point to teach the think-aloud procedure (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998).

The think-aloud procedure consists of having students read a text silently and then having students give as much information about what he/she is thinking during and after reading it. Students were given a choice on which language they wanted to use, English or Spanish. The uses of familiar information aided in having students participate in conversation. After this activity, students were introduced to culturally relevant books. Three cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were used in reading these books. One of the strategies was (a) approaching unknown vocabulary, which integrated pronunciation of words, context clues, and finding cognate association; (b) asking questions to monitor comprehension; and (c) making inferences, which involve making a connection between prior knowledge and the text (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998).

The three students also had problems with word recognition and reading fluency. According to Jimenez, it was important to use culturally relevant readings which students could relate to, student oral responses, and instruction that would enhance comprehension. Students were asked to read silently and on an individual basis, were asked to read aloud. When students had difficulty reading, they were asked to reread the phrase several times. Students were then asked to reread the phrase silently within the context of the paragraph to bring meaning (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998).

Cognitive strategies include questioning, cross-examining reading material, summarizing, and using prior knowledge to make bridges with information being learned (Conley, 2008). Through this particular study, it was determined that literacy skills can be developed in middle school Latino students using culturally relevant material, cognitive reading strategies, and focusing on comprehension (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998).

Therefore, due to the growing need in literacy development among ELLs, it is our responsibility as policymakers and educators to provide the needed support to assist in their learning. It is crucial that they have access to a quality instruction. With the implementation of RTI, schools will focus on providing effective interventions necessary to improve the ELLs’ learning and literacy skills. This framework will provide for a paradigm shift on how educators view their students. Instead of placing blame on the child, educators will look for solutions that they have access to. Pedagogy that is culturally relevant and research based teaching practices will be at the forefront, in order for ELLs to be successful.
References


