Characteristics of Effective Instructional Programs for English Language Learners

Imelda G. Chapa
Texas A&M University/Texas A&M International University

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to examine extant literature and design a theoretical model that will offer optimal learning conditions for English Language Learners. Through the use of qualitative extant studies, this article will supply the reader with characteristics of bilingual programs, bilingualism misconceptions, overrepresentation of minority and English Language Learners in special education, and teaching practices that have been proven to assist English Language Learner students to achieve academically. This researcher analyzed the extant literature using an advocacy worldview. After analyzing the extant literature, the researcher found common themes and formulated a theoretical model that may yield to English Language Learner success in schools.

Purpose
The purpose of this article is to examine extant literature and design a theoretical model that will offer optimal learning conditions for English Language Learners. This article will also provide a brief description of bilingual programs, bilingualism misconceptions, teachers’ perceptions of bilingual students, the overrepresentation of English Language Learners in special education, and characteristics of successful bilingual programs. For the purpose of this paper the terms English Language Learners (ELLs), Bilingual Student, and Language minority students will be used interchangeably. Effective instructional characteristics will refer to those instructional conditions that yielded English Language Learner success. The significance of this study is to provide teachers with instructional characteristics as well as aspects of successful programs that have been proven to assist bilingual students’ achievement. Teachers will also be able to determine which aspects of instructional characteristics yielded little if no bilingual student success. Not only will it assist teachers in implementing or improving instructional programs that may help bilingual students, this study will also shed light to flaws and inconsistencies when trying to address bilingual students’ needs.

Worldview and Theoretical Framework
This article analyzes extant literature and is written using an advocacy worldview since there is a need to reform bilingual education instructional practices in this country. This article is written using the theoretical framework of socio-culturalism. Hymes (as cited in Ajayi, 2008) refers to socio-cultural theory as that which is largely influenced by Vygotsky's theories, thus considering learning as dependent on the context (social setting) it’s learned; hence, students make meaning of their learning depending on the context it is presented in.

ELL Population Growth and Bilingual Education Laws
The growth of minority students in the schools has dramatically increased in the past 20 years (Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007). Capps et al. (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009), stated that between 1990 and 2000, the English Language Learner population in the United States grew 52 percent, growing from 14 million to 21.3 million. According to Nordby (2009) as of 2005 there were 5 million
students in the United States classified as English Language Learners; Spanish being the most common native language at about 80 percent. Thomas and Collier (as cited in Honigsfeld 2009) predicted that by the year 2030, language minority students will make up 40 percent of the U.S. population. With such growth in the bilingual student population, classrooms need to provide the adequate instruction and guarantee these students adequate instruction.

Due to the growth of language minority students in this country, there have been several policies and federal government enactments that have been developed in order to provide bilingual education to students and guarantee these students equal access to education (Lee, 2006). According to Garcia (2008), the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1974, Lau vs. Nichols, was the landmark for Bilingual education. Garcia (2008) included examples such as the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “which prohibits discrimination by educational institutions on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin and by the subsequent Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA);” along with these policies, Congress has passed legislation that deals with the education of English Language Learners through the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) (p.335).

Second Language Development

There are advantages of speaking two languages. It has been found that a student’s first language helps that student in the development of a second language. Nordby (2009) stated that the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence 2003 (CREDE) found that teaching in the students’ first language helped students become fluent in English (their second language) and to acquire literacy skills. This phenomenon could be explained through the idea of transferability of concepts (Nordby, 2009). For example, if a student understands nouns in their native language, it enables them to transfer this knowledge to the second language (Nordby, 2009). According to Hymes (as cited in Ajayi, 2008), something to consider when children are learning a second language is that its development is dependent on the context it’s learned; students make meaning of the second language depending on the social aspect not only on the linguistic aspect. Thorne (as cited in Ajayi, 2008) stated that the “fundamentals of language are socially constructed” (p.2).

Bilingual Programs

Garcia (2008) defined Bilingual education as those instructional techniques which will provide “enhanced learning opportunities” to language minority students (p.321). Most of the bilingual programs instruct students in the second language with some instruction and/or language support in the students’ native language. The transition to all-English instruction is done within a few years after the student entered the program. There are several Bilingual programs in existence in the United States. Laosa (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) identified five programs; one of the programs, English-monolingual, provides instruction in all-English, with no instruction in the students’ first language. Laosa (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) also reported that two out of the five bilingual programs, English monolingual plus ESL program and structured immersion programs, use the students’ home language for clarification and/ or language support. The other two bilingual programs that Laosa (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) found were transitional bilingual and maintenance bilingual programs, which deliver some instruction in the students’ first language. However, the difference between the two is that in the maintenance bilingual programs students are able to develop full proficiency in their home language and in the English language. Another bilingual program in existence is the dual language program, or two-way bilingual program. These programs instruct English and non-English speaking students in two languages (Honigsfeld, 2009).
Which Bilingual Program Works Best?

With so many Bilingual programs people wonder incessantly which type of program or instructional approach works best. Claude and Goldenberg (as cited in Nordby, 2009) found that “no one approach fits all” (p.2). However, it is known that Bilingual education if implemented adequately, results in student achievement. Youngquist, Martinez-Griego, Fuentes, and Guillen (2009) found that a group of Spanish-speaking 3-year-olds entered head-start with similar levels of language and literacy skills than the group of English-speaking 3-year-old students. Nevertheless, a year later the language minority students were behind in those skills. The Spanish-speaking students at this head-start were in a bilingual immersion program. These researchers found that their classrooms were not supporting these English Language Learners with adequate and consistent instruction in their first language (Youngquist et al., 2009). Thus, bringing forth the fact that when bilingual students do not receive adequate instructional support, they tend to lag behind.

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence 2003(CREDE) (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) summarized “three key findings” related to bilingual programs. The CREDE report found that dual programs and other Bilingual education programs helped students score 50 percent above other test takers in both their first and second language in all content areas; also these students maintained that level of achievement, or reached higher levels till the end of their school years; these programs had the fewest dropouts (CREDE as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009). Moreover, CREDE 2003 (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) found that those ELL students who had been placed in English-only programs because of parent refusal showed a significant drop in achievement by the 5th grade in reading and math, when compared to students who had received bilingual education; these students made up the largest number of dropouts. Another interesting finding from the CREDE report (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) was that those students who had exited Bilingual programs and placed in English mainstream classes to receive all-English instruction did better academically than students who had continued in Bilingual programs, when they were tested in English. By middle school years, however, those students who had received bilingual education were able to perform at the same achievement level as those students who received English-only instruction; and alarmingly by high school years, students who received bilingual education did better academically than those who had received all English instruction during their schooling.

Referring back to the Youngquist et al. (2009) study and comparing their findings to the CREDE findings of bilingual programs, the reason why language minority students may lag behind in comparison to monolingual and/or ELL students who received adequate and appropriate bilingual instruction may be due to the lack of home language support during instruction and the inadequate implementation of a bilingual program.

Bilingualism Misconceptions

Even though there is a plethora of research in the area of bilingualism, people still have many misconceptions. One of the biggest misconceptions is to perceive the student’s first language as a deficit, or thinking that learning two languages might confuse the students. For example, bilingual education opponents view languages other than English as “obstacles” (Lee, 2006). Valencia (as cited in Flores and Smith, 2007) found that teachers with many years of experience might be more apt to perceive students’ home language as a deficit. Furthermore, it’s been found that parents feel their child might be unsuccessful in school due to bilingualism. Baker (2007) cautions parents to not view bilingualism as something that will confuse their child; it should be seen as a cognitive advantage since the child resorts to two cognitive “engines” instead of one.
An issue that correlates to this deficit thinking is code-switching. Code-switching refers to the combination of students’ home language and second language to convey meaning (e.g. saying a sentence with English and Spanish words). When a bilingual student code-switches, a monolingual may see this as a deficit or not being proficient in either of the two languages (Baker, 2007). Code-switching should be seen as an effective means of communication instead of a deficit since children resort to using all the language skills he/she possesses in order to convey meaning, thus being pragmatic (Baker, 2007).

**Students’ Perceptions of Bilingual Programs**

It is common to read studies in which researchers conduct studies in classrooms and at schools to determine whether bilingual programs are effective or not. These studies look at teachers’ instruction, district and school wide efforts, as well as students’ achievement or failure on standardized tests. Nevertheless, there aren’t many studies which have asked bilingual students of their perception toward bilingual programs. Lee (2006) conducted a study in which English Language Learners were asked about their perception of bilingual programs. The findings revealed that the majority of the ELL students supported the use of the first and second language in the classroom, hoped to become fluent in both languages, and thought that bilingual programs helped their experience at school and enhanced their emotional and cognitive skills (Lee, 2006). Nevertheless, even though bilingual students supported the use of two languages in the class and hoped to become fluent in both languages, these students stated they preferred to be placed in classrooms that were not classified as bilingual, which proves the need to improve current bilingual programs, assessments, and placement (Lee, 2006).

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Minority and ELL students**

Dee and Henkin (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) reported that new and experienced teachers are not adequately prepared to instruct students who are culturally diverse. Similarly, Burris and Burriss; Godley et al.; Karbenick and Clemens (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) found in extant literature that a large number of teachers who taught bilingual students did not feel adequately prepared to instruct such subgroup. Ajayi (2008) reported that an English Language Development coordinator with 17 year teaching experience said English Language Learners experience difficult learning conditions due to teachers not being adequately trained. The lack of trained teachers or the lack of professional development may cause teachers to perceive bilingual students in an unfavorable manner. One may believe that teachers who hold negative attitudinal beliefs toward minority students or bilingual students must be White teachers. On the contrary, studies have revealed that teachers who have negative perceptions toward language minority students are not only European American but minority teachers as well (Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007).

Sirota and Bailey (2009) conducted a study and found that when teachers were asked to predict minority students’ potential of academic success, the teachers would rank these students’ potential lower than they ranked those of white students. Consequently, students’ perceptions of themselves were found to be directly correlated to the way they felt their teachers perceived them (Sirota & Bailey, 2009). Reck (1990) also states that student academic achievement is a direct result of teacher’s behavior toward them. Ajayi (2008) reported that a teacher pointed out how many students interpreted English as a Second Language program to special education programs. Thereby, not only do teachers perceive language minority students negatively, students themselves perceive bilingualism negatively as mentioned previously. It almost seems as if being “labeled”
bilingual has a negative connotation. Cooney & Akintude, Yoon (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) reported that generalist teachers’ perceive bilingual students as a burden. Moreover, Katz; Payne; den Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, & Wubbels; Reeves (as cited in Bustos-Flores & Smith, 2007) reported findings that indicated teachers’ perceptions of English Language Learners have an impact on these students’ achievement levels. This makes one wonder how many language minority students have been unsuccessful due to teachers’ perception of them.

**Overrepresentation of ELL students in Special Education**

Unsuccessful English Language Learners are most of the time referred to special education services due to having an “apparent” difficulty in attaining concepts in the classroom. Baker (2007) stated that when bilingual students underachieve it may be due to the child’s two languages being poorly developed, lack of exposure to the second language, immersion (fast conversion) since it denies the students to use their first language skills, a mismatch between home and school, socioeconomic factors, the type of school child attends-the type of bilingual program(s) in place, and the quality of education- bilingualism of teachers, the balancing of two languages in the classroom. Overrepresentation of minority students in special education services is another issue that results from the underachievement of these students. Oviedo and González (n.d.) found that in a 1973 study conducted in Riverside, California black and Hispanic students’ placement was three to four times greater than those of any other ethnicity group. Lawsuits were filed on behalf of the minority groups. These lawsuits were made due to minority students being tested in a language other than their native language (Oviedo & González, n.d.) Ajayi et al. (2008) conducted teacher interviews and asked a teacher why she felt the learning conditions could be challenging for bilingual students; this teacher responded that language minority students were asked to take state exams after two years of learning English. This teacher further argued that it takes ELL students between 5 to 7 years to attain the academic language (Ajayi et al., 2008). Thereby, when students are tested in their second language, it is unjust since the bilingual student has not acquired the academic language needed for such assessments. If and when bilingual students repeatedly fail these assessments, they are perceived as lacking knowledge, when in fact they are lacking first language academic skills. Cabello and Burstein (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) found that bilingual students who underachieve may be perceived as deficient in language skills and cognitive skills.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

As an educator one needs to become aware of students’ culture and language and get acquainted with bilingual and second language development theories in order to address language minority students’ needs. Cardenas and Cardenas (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) reported that the reason why schools were not successful was due to incompatibilities, such as materials used to teach being about White, middle-class English-speaking perspectives and language and cultural aspects being ignored. Ladson-Billings (as cited in Bustos-Flores and Smith, 2007) documented that teachers were effective when instruction was delivered in a culturally relevant manner. Rogoff and Vygotsky (as cited in Reyes and Azuara, 2008) reported that students acquire new learning through the use of tools that are available to them in their environment and that children learn through their interaction with people and what they experience in their sociocultural context.
When teachers instruct with cultural aspects that relate to minority students, those teachers are teaching culturally responsive. Cultural Responsive teaching refers to English Language Learners receiving the same instruction but with cultural aspects that are familiar to these students (Good and Brophy, 2008). According to Ajayi et al. (2008), teachers need to realize that ELL students will bring into the classroom their own cultural heritage. If students are not taught in a culturally responsive manner, there will be a cultural mismatch between the home and school that may cause bilingual students to underachieve. A cultural mismatch entails differences in language, culture, values, and beliefs (Baker, 2007). Furthermore, Bustos-Flores and (2007) posit that when teachers do not possess cultural awareness, it may contribute to student failure. Good and Brophy (2008) posit that culturally responsive teachers are those who use students’ out of school experiences as means to understand academic concepts; establish collaborative learning communities in which the teacher cares for students regardless of race, culture, and linguistic differences; provides warm teacher-student rapport; communicate expectations concerning respect and academics; and set high expectations.

Teachers should also view the students’ culture and home life as an opportunity to increase language minority student achievement. There is a phenomenon known as “funds of knowledge.” Funds of knowledge refer to the knowledge that is found outside school in communities, deriving from language and the students’ culture which are rarely found in the curriculum or lessons (Baker, 2007). When teachers resort to these funds of knowledge to develop their instruction, it yields to student success (Bustos-Flores & Smith, 2007). If teachers are not culturally sensitive and do not employ culturally responsive teaching, bilingual students will likely lag behind. Duff and Early (as cited in Garcia, edited by Altarriba and Heredia, 2008) reported that students who were mainstreamed struggled academically and socially because mainstream students did not share their cultural background. Hence, the teacher is the one who is responsible to provide language minority students with culturally responsive instruction in order for students to succeed academically.

**Characteristics of Effective Instructional Programs**

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence 2003(CREDE) (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009) found that English language learners will do well when the goals are clear and the context in which the goals are presented in is meaningful, when the content is rich, and when students are engaged in the lessons. Baker (2007) reported that there were specific techniques of immersion used by teachers. Most states in this country have bilingual immersion programs, thus the techniques will be reported. The specific techniques used by immersion teachers include: using contextual support-gestures, like facial expressions; being more thorough with directions and signaling when to start or end activities; link new knowledge to students’ prior knowledge; incorporate many visuals, like pictures, manipulatives; ask for student feedback to monitor their understanding; correct students indirectly; implement a variety of academic learning tasks and language learning tasks; and frequently check students’ understanding in a variety of different ways (Baker, 2007).

In the Youngquist et al. (2009) study, which was mentioned previously, a head-start program revamped the way they addressed Spanish-speaking children in their English-immersion classrooms, and the program became successful after a few tweaks were made. Before these changes were implemented, the Spanish-speaking children had shown a significant drop in language and literacy skills when compared to their monolingual classmates. According to Youngquist et al. (2009) the head-start program increased their staff with knowledge of language approaches; provided
instructional support through the use of bilingual material for students, parents, and teachers; and hired more staff with bilingual skills while also supported monolingual staff when pursuing language classes. After the changes were made, the program met expectations. These young students, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, were able to demonstrate similar language and literacy skills (Youngquist et al., 2009). In the Youngquist et al. (2009) study, the researchers were able to find that these bilingual students were lagging behind after one year, even at such an early age. This is why it is of utmost importance for teachers to assess language minority students at an early phase or after several months of entering into a bilingual program. If bilingual students are not constantly monitored (e.g. at the end of every semester or school year), chances are these students will not progress as they should, thus they will fall behind academically. If this lag continues every year after that, the gap will become wider and it will be difficult for these students to be successful in the school setting.

In order to ensure language minority students with the appropriate instruction, several instructional approaches and school characteristics were compiled from extant literature. Good and Brophy (2008) recommend for teachers to address ELL needs in the following manner: incorporate students’ home language in class activities, label things in classroom in both languages, simplify language during instruction, use gestures to assist with meaning, allow students who share the same home language to work together, and have dual language dictionaries handy so that they can be used as resources. Nordby (2009) suggests for teachers that have ELL students in their classroom to use the following instructional approaches: reading about topics that are familiar to the ELLs; building vocabulary by showing visual images; teacher aides or volunteers that speak the native language; teachers assessing knowledge and language separately; and extending the school day since the ELL student is learning one more “thing,” which is an additional language (English).

The following instructional approaches were proven to work in schools that had large numbers of English Language Learners. August and Hatuka (as cited by Garcia, 2008) reported certain optimal learning conditions in which linguistic and diverse populations were academically successful. The learning conditions August and Hatuka (as cited by Garcia, 2008) reported were a supportive school climate, campus leadership, customized learning, communication within and between schools, instruction using students’ native language and culture, instruction that required lower and higher levels of thinking, instructional strategies that facilitated comprehension, opportunities for students to practice their acquired learning, student assessment, staff professional development, and parental involvement.

There are several characteristics of programs and schools that are known to produce a large number of successful bilingual students. The San Diego County Office of Education studied six bilingual schools (a large number of bilingual students attended these schools) in the state of California. The six schools’ staff were reported to be knowledgeable about language acquisition and the theory behind using the students’ native language for instruction; provided quality instruction in the students’ first language: in most of the classes, literacy in the native language was developed first and then in English; English instruction was conducted through interactive strategies when building on knowledge or building vocabulary; and when instruction’s focus was to “accelerate English language development, it occurred in a socio-culturally supportive environment” (Gold, 2006 p. 49). Furthermore, the study found that these schools shared the following characteristics: they had a clear mission, set high expectations, they all had strong instructional leadership, staff continuously monitored student progress and planned instruction according to students’ needs,
students learned in a safe environment, and there was collaboration between the home and school (Gold, 2006).

Similarly, Thomas and Collier (as cited by Garcia, 2008) found academically successful programs; their studies included more than 40,000 student records and 8 to 12 years of data from various school districts. These schools served linguistic and diverse students. Three key findings were reported by Thomas and Collier (as cited by Garcia, 2008): instruction that required complex cognitive thinking was delivered in the students’ native language for as long as possible; up to date instructional approaches, like active discovery and cognitive complex thinking were used in teaching content using students’ first language and English; and changes in the schools’ socio-cultural context.

Closing Thoughts

This article is a compilation of extant literature; thereby, that is a limitation in itself. Nevertheless, the literature which is included serves as a tool for districts, schools, and teachers to revamp their current bilingual programs and the way they address English Language Learners in the classroom.

There is no one way to teach English Language Learners effectively. However, there are certain learning conditions and instructional characteristics that enable bilingual students to be successful in the academic setting. Figure 1 depicts the themes that emerged from the extant literature regarding the optimal learning conditions for English Language Learners. Figure 2 offers a theoretical model of optimal learning conditions for English Language Learners with specific characteristics included.

Implications and Recommendations

Bilingual programs need to use students’ native language when instructing complex concepts. Teachers should allow students to use their native language before requiring students to use the English language. It is important to not forget that it takes English Language Learners between 5 to 7 years to acquire academic language. Therefore, teachers should allow bilingual students to use their native language in the academic setting when students find it difficult to express themselves in English. Moreover, students should be allowed to code-switch. By doing so, students are resorting to both language skills to communicate with others. When a student code-switches, the grammar rules of one of the two languages are followed (Baker, 2007). For example, if a student says, “Ayer I went to the tienda,” (ayer means yesterday and tienda means store), this student is following the appropriate verb tense in the sentence. Thus, the meaning of the sentence is coherent to those who understand both languages since the students meant to say, “Yesterday I went to the store.” Therefore, teachers should allow students to code-switch as long as they follow either the native language or the second language’s grammar rules.

Teachers should receive the appropriate training to address language minority students. By receiving professional development of techniques that assist bilingual students’ learning, their instructional practices will improve and yield student success. Teachers should also incorporate bilingual students’ cultural background when delivering instruction in order for students to be able to find a “match” between their home and school. Inadequate or lack of teacher training as well as cultural insensitivity can cause students to fail academically. Teachers should know the difference between assessment of linguistic skills and assessment of knowledge skills in order to not misconstrue students’ scores. Assessments are not good indicators of bilingual students’ academic standing. Teachers and administrators should be cautious when utilizing assessment scores to determine students’ achievement levels. Most students are exited from bilingual services after two years of being in the program. This is not enough time for students to gain enough skills in the second language much less be able to do well on an assessment.
District and school-wide efforts are needed in order for programs to be successful. School administrators, staff (teachers and personnel), and parents should collaborate and share a vision of English Language Learner success. Without one of these important pieces—parents, administrators, and staff—bilingual programs will not be successful.
Figure 1

The arrows indicate which individual(s) or institution provides that particular theme for their benefit. For example, when **TEACHERS** deliver **ADEQUATE INSTRUCTION**, **ELLs** benefit from it.
Theoretical Model of Optimal Learning Conditions for English Language Learners

Optimal Learning Conditions for
English Language Learners

Parents/Guardians
Supportive of child's learning, communicates with school, monitors child's progress, supportive of child's learning

Background
Culture, home language, socioeconomics, parents' level of education

English Language Learner
- Takes between 5 to 7 years to acquire academic language
- First language needs to be developed before skills can be developed in the second language
- Possess 2 cognitive "engines" and should be allowed to resort to both
- Learn better when their culture and language are incorporated into instruction

Schools
- Administrative support
- Resources
- Teachers work collaboratively
- Campus goals of addressing ELL students' needs
- Provide training opportunities
- Communicate with teachers and parents

Teachers
Adequately trained, warm, culturally responsive teaching, classroom is safe environment, get acquainted with students' background

Instruction
- Allow home language to be used
- Cultural and linguistic aspects incorporated
- Provide opportunities for practice
- Use gestures, visuals
- Relate material to prior knowledge and build on it
- Set high expectations

*Lines indicate which conditions (e.g. teacher, ELL, instruction) are dependent of one another for English Language Learner success
References


