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Research Based Strategies in Reading and Writing for Content Area Teachers: A Website to Support Growth in Academic Language

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Research Based Strategies in Reading and Writing for Content Area Teachers:
A Website to Support Growth in Academic Language

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in English as a Second Language

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DEDICATION

To my dad for teaching me the importance of integrity and a solid work ethic. Your belief in the importance of education and hard work has given me the drive to complete this project. To my friend, Nancy, who encouraged me to further my education by pursuing this degree.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	6
Overview.....	6
Miguel’s Story.....	7
Aden’s Story.....	8
Rosa’s Story.....	9
Personal Interest.....	10
Significance of the Project.....	10
Purpose of the Project.....	11
Goals.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature.....	15
Background.....	15
WIDA Consortium Proficiency Levels.....	17
Newcomers.....	17
Intermediate Learners.....	19
Long-Term English Language Learners.....	20
Opportunity Gap.....	22
Reading Strategies and Skills.....	26
Writing Strategies.....	31
Conclusion.....	34
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	35
Background.....	35

Chapter Overview.....	35
Project Overview.....	36
Framework.....	37
Participants and Setting.....	42
Project Specifics.....	43
Summary.....	43
Conclusion.....	44
CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection.....	45
Introduction.....	45
Major Learnings.....	46
Review of the Literature.....	48
Implications.....	51
Limitations.....	51
Future Research.....	52
Communicating Results.....	52
Benefit to the Profession.....	53
Summary.....	53
REFERENCES.....	55
APPENDICES.....	59
Appendix A.....	59
Appendix B.....	60

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

When I began teaching English language learners (ELLs) many years ago, one thing became evident: many of them struggled with reading and writing. This struggle led to not only frustrations in the classroom, but an opportunity gap between ELLs and native English speaking peers' proficiency in literacy which is still present today. While this was evident with newcomers and students with intermediate language proficiency, I was especially surprised that students who had been in the ELL program since early elementary school continued to struggle with reading and writing. Every year, teachers came to me looking for answers to support all of these language learners. This continued need brings me to the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

As I continued to work with English language learners, I learned that there is sufficient research on how to support preschool and elementary children, but limited information and strategies on how to support middle school and high school ELLs, especially those in the mainstream classroom.

This chapter begins with stories about three very different English learners. These stories serve as a backdrop for why I believe this is such an important topic. Next, I'll discuss the development of my interest in finding reading and writing strategies to close the opportunity gap. The chapter continues with a discussion of the significance of the

project by giving a history of how ELLs perform nationwide compared to English speaking peers, and the purpose of the project by explaining what occurs when I introduce my students to core teachers. Finally, I will discuss my goals for the project through a short description. Let me begin by telling you three very different stories.

The stories I am about to tell you are a snapshot of the diversity seen in the students I have worked with over my years as an ELL teacher. I have watched newcomers with little to no English struggle and work hard to become proficient. I have also seen newcomers with little to no English proficiency finally become comfortable using social English only to graduate high school without mastering academic English,. There have been countless students who become proficient in English during elementary school, only to struggle in middle school and high school falling behind their native English speaking peers. Every student has a unique story and different needs.

Miguel's Story

Miguel arrived in our school district directly from Colombia. He was 16 and considered a newcomer. The United States Department of Education defines newcomers as students who have recently arrived in the U.S. Newcomers may or may not have low literacy in their native language and may also come to our schools with little or no formal schooling. Many have been taught differently in their home countries. Fortunately, Miguel was very literate in Spanish, his first language, when he arrived at our school and was placed in 10th grade along with his age appropriate peers. When Miguel was in school in Colombia, he was a straight A student with exemplary behavior coupled with reading and writing at grade level in his native language. With the transfer credits, Miguel was on track for graduation. Miguel did not speak or understand any English

when he arrived, so his classes were very difficult for him. While he was eager to learn English, Miguel became frustrated when he was unable to comprehend what his teachers were saying. Because Miguel could not understand his teachers, he was unable to do the work. On top of that, he worked two part time jobs in order to help support his family. The next year, when Miguel was a junior, he was beginning to understand English, but still could only speak a few words. His classes were still very difficult for him and he struggled with attendance. There were many nights where Miguel had to work so it was difficult for him to get up for school the next day. Miguel is a senior now, and in his third year at an American high school. Miguel's social English is developing well and he is able to comprehend some academic concepts in English as well. Miguel is still working two jobs and his attendance at school can be an issue. However, when Miguel is at school, he does his very best to be an independent learner despite the language barrier. Miguel and students like him need support from content area teachers in order to make the content comprehensible, and content teachers need strategies.

Aden's Story

Aden arrived from Somalia when he was in fourth grade. He knew very little English, but could read and write in his home language of Somali. Immediately, Aden was placed in the ELL program at his elementary school. He received sheltered instruction in English and also participated in a mainstream classroom. Aden developed social English very quickly and had many friends. As Aden progressed through the grades, his English skills developed and by the time he was in 5th grade he was proficient in social English. As the months and years passed, Aden continued to develop his academic English and by sixth grade he was fully mainstreamed into all of his classes.

Now, Aden is a seventh grade student. While he is doing well in his classes, he still needs English language support for concepts that are difficult to understand, especially those that are heavily reliant on language or abstract. Like Miguel, Aden's teachers need support and strategies to make the content understandable for Aden.

Rosa's Story

Rosa, is a seventh grader, who was born to Spanish-speaking parents who immigrated to America before she was born. Rosa's first language is Spanish and when Rosa entered kindergarten, she was exposed to English for the first time, qualifying her for the ELL program for support in language acquisition. In kindergarten, she learned the letters and sounds in English and even began to read words in English. Because Rosa was immersed in English all day long, she learned rather quickly. Soon, she was performing alongside her grade-level peers. As Rosa continued through elementary school, she continued to read, write, speak, and listen to English at school and listen to and speak Spanish at home. However, as Rosa progressed through the upper grades, content, and language became more difficult for her and she began to fall behind. When she reached middle school, assignments in reading and writing continually became more difficult for her. Because Rosa was immersed in English for so many years and learned to read and write in English, she began to lose her ability to communicate in Spanish. Now, since she never learned to read or write in Spanish, she is only able to communicate orally with her family. Rosa has now been in the English language program for over seven years but still needs support in her classes in order to understand the content.

Personal Interest

Each English language learner has unique needs depending on their language level but one thing they have in common is they are learning English. Many of these students struggle with certain aspects of English such as vocabulary, generating ideas, making inferences, comprehension, and many other important reading and writing skills that are needed for students to be successful in middle and high school. Along with these important skills, they also need communication skills, critical thinking skills, and skills to collaborate with peers, which is also a struggle for them. Students like Miguel, Aden, and Rosa are at a disadvantage because not only do they have to learn the content, but they have to learn the language as well. These are the types of students I work with every day and content area teachers are always looking for strategies to support them in their classrooms. Having a one-stop place to go will be instrumental in helping these teachers find the support they need to help not only the ELL students but all students.

Significance of the Project

Miguel, Aden, and Rosa have dreams. In my over twenty years of teaching, I have found that English Language learners have the same dreams and aspirations as our native English speakers. They dream of becoming doctors, nurses, business people, computer scientists, and teachers. However, as they progress through elementary school and get into middle school and high school, the opportunity gap widens and these learners struggle to understand many of the concepts needed for them to be successful in the classes that will help them reach their dreams. According to Garcia (2012), the achievement/opportunity gap has become the norm for many American schools and among particular groups, it is more evident. This group includes ELLs. In fact, since

2002, average reading scores in the United States on standardized testing were significantly lower for students with ELL status (Polat et al., 2016). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] from the National Center for Educational Statistics, (2019), the average reading score for ELL eighth graders from Wisconsin in 2019 was 230 compared to an average score of 260 for students who were not considered to be ELLs. Because of this, our English language learners also have to work twice as hard to complete the required schoolwork, especially at the high school level, and I find them to be some of the hardest working students I know. Students know what they need to be successful. They are very much aware that they need to develop academic vocabulary and writing skills (Kim & Garcia, 2014). Oftentimes, our ELLs can feel defeated because the content is so difficult to understand and many feel that they cannot become fully English proficient and be exited from the program (Klein, 2016). This could be reversed by content teachers knowing what strategies to use for these students to be successful. The need for strategies teachers can use becomes more evident every year, and I am always faced with the question from teachers: “How can I support ELLs in the classroom by making academic language comprehensible?”

Purpose of the Project

At the beginning of every school year, I visit with teams of teachers and explain to them that they will have English language learners in their class. I discuss the language levels and what the students can do. I also discuss what accommodations the students will receive and let them know that I am their support person for these students. I offer a few suggestions about how to support them in class, but I am finding out that this is not enough. Teachers want more. When teachers find out they will have an ELL in their

class, the first question they want answers to is how can they best support them. Teachers do not want a few suggestions. Teachers want concrete strategies that they can implement in their classes to best support their ELL students. This need has led me to the focus of my research to find the best strategies in reading and writing to support ELLs in content area classes.

Goals

My research began with the idea that every school year teams of content teachers look for strategies to support ELLs in their classrooms. Through these informal conversations, I discovered that teachers were in search of strategies in reading comprehension, summarizing, vocabulary building, and writing to name a few. That is when I decided to base my research around these needs. After finding out that teachers want concrete strategies, I wondered what teachers knew about ELLs and their language levels, what ELLs can do, what barriers hold back ELLs from acquiring academic language like their English speaking peers, and their comfort level with research-based strategies. I found out that some didn't have much background knowledge with these wonderings but others had a moderate understanding. There were very few that were extremely comfortable with their understanding of my questions. Therefore, my research turned to developing a website for them based on these needs. The goal of this website is to provide teachers with research-based reading and writing strategies that will help close the opportunity gap between ELLs and English speaking peers. The primary research question I aim to answer is: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high*

school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?

By answering this question, teachers will be provided with practical ideas and strategies to implement in their classrooms. Not only will these strategies help ELLs, who are the focus of this research, but they are likely to support mainstream students as well who may be struggling with the same reading and writing skills. Students will benefit from this research by having content become more comprehensible to them. With this new level of comprehensibility, their confidence will increase and they will score better on summative assessments. Families will also benefit from less stress as their students come home armed with skills that will help them complete their work successfully.

Conclusion

This brings us back to Miguel, Aden, and Rosa . They are now back in class and their teachers are using strategies to make content more comprehensible to them. They can understand what those tasks are and become more confident. Their teachers have an arsenal of ideas to implement in their classes and will no longer panic when they are told that they will have an English language in their class. Armed with new strategies, the hope is that the students will respond positively to them with the goal of closing the opportunity gap.

This project will include a literature review in Chapter Two discussing what the research says about who each unique group of ELLs are by defining them, discussing their barriers, as well as their feelings and perceptions about school. The achievement/opportunity gap and how ELLs compare to native English speaking peers, will also be reviewed along with reading and writing strategies that will support ELLs in

the classroom. Chapter Three will focus on the goals of my research and its rationale, a research based framework for the website and my plan for developing it, the participants and their wonderings about ELLs, as well as the setting and questions I plan to ask participants after visiting the website. Finally, Chapter Four will be a reflection of my project as a whole and my learning as a researcher and writer along with a short review of the literature. Finally, implications and limitations if the project will be discussed in regards to the information found as well as the future research needed on this topic of reading and writing strategies for content area teachers.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Background

Academic reading and writing skills are important for success in school. Students in the mainstream classroom come from a wide variety of backgrounds and not all of them have the same grasp on these strategies. In many schools in the United States, classrooms are becoming more and more populated with English language learners. In fact, the ELL population has increased by 50% or more in the past ten years (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012) and these populations in schools today encompass students of varying language ability. Plus, given the differences in educational systems across the globe, their literacy and skills vary from being behind or in line with their peers in the United States. In some schools, 20% of the school population can be students who are new to the country (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012). Intermediate learners, those who may have been in the country and learning English for at least three years and are also part of the school population. Both of these groups struggle in the classroom. They need continued academic language development support in order to be successful in reading, writing, and even speaking (Ferlazzo & Sypeinski, 2012). These intermediate learners often become long-term English learners because they do not have the academic language that makes them successful readers and writers. Long-term English language learners are classified as ELLs who have attended public schools in the United States for at least seven years (Kim & Garcia, 2014). Oftentimes they fall behind their native English-speaking peers, causing the opportunity gap to widen. These students score lower on standardized tests, have a lower high school graduation rate and often drop out compared to native English

speaking peers (Lee, 2012). Finding strategies in reading and writing are essential for all of these students to be successful in school. This need for strategies has led me to the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

By answering this question through sharing research based strategies, teachers will have a variety of supports they can use in their classrooms that will aim to close the opportunity gap that continues to be an issue for English language learners.

The opportunity gap between ELLs and native English speaking peers continues to be a problem. They lack reading and writing skills to be successful in academic language. This could be due to unfamiliarity with the American school system and strategies American students learn, or lack of a literacy-rich environment at home (Pang, 2013). Being literate - the ability to read and write - in a native language leads to success in schools (Johnston, 2013). Since ELLs come to school with varying abilities in language acquisition and literacy in their first language, teachers need resources and strategies to help them succeed. The main purpose of this paper is to describe and give teachers appropriate strategies to best teach and support ELLs with the long-term goal of closing the opportunity gap.

This chapter will begin with describing the three distinct groups of learners that many teachers encounter in their classes every year, newcomers, intermediate learners, and long-term learners. Following that, information about the opportunity gap and how it affects ELLs will be shared. Furthermore, the research behind the reading and writing

strategies that are the focus of my product, a website, are discussed highlighting studies appropriate to learners in content area classes.

WIDA Consortium Language Proficiency Levels

The World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA) is an organization that is responsible for the research, design and implementation of the English Language Standards used by the states which belong to this organization. It encompasses several states and provides resources for teachers and parents as well as language screeners and the state assessment called the ACCESS for ELLs which is used to determine the language proficiency levels of ELLs enrolled in a district. This assessment is given yearly and tests students' English proficiency in the four language domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The results of this assessment are described as an overall composite score or proficiency level which is a combination of scores from the four domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. WIDA has six English proficiency levels which come from the overall composite score on the yearly ACCESS test. As stated in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction EL Policy Handbook (2021), the proficiency levels include Level 1 - Beginning Preproduction, Level 2- Beginning Production, Level 3 - Intermediate, Level 4 - Advanced Intermediate, Level 5 - Advanced, and Level 6 - Former EL, now Fully English Proficient. These levels describe the three main types of language learners - newcomers, intermediate, and advanced.

Newcomers

Newcomers are students who are new to a country. In the United States, many arrive with limited or interrupted formal schooling which already puts them behind their

peers of the same age. They speak little to no English and some read below grade level in their native language (DelliCarpini et al., 2009). Those who come to school proficient in literacy in their home language fare better than those who are behind, but they do have struggles. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction EL Policy Handbook (2021), when newcomers are assessed on the yearly language proficiency test, their overall proficiency scores range from 1.0-2.9 on WIDA language proficiency scale.

Newcomer ELLs have to play catch-up to their native English peers, but face many obstacles. First, they must adjust to their new communities while families are in survival mode and concerned about providing for basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing. This can all be very stressful for a newcomer and their family (DelliCarpini et al., 2009). When newcomers get to school, they are often placed in a sheltered instruction program in which they are learning among their same language level peers. While sheltered instruction has its benefits, it is usually geared towards students who are at grade level in their native language (DelliCarpini et al., 2009). Students who are below grade level in their home language are going to struggle with the content in these sheltered instruction classes. In addition, schools are not prepared to accommodate the diverse needs of newcomer students. Parents are reluctant to interact for fear that they won't be respected, welcomed, or included (DelliCarpini et al., 2009). Schools need to do everything they can to include newcomer students and families.

Imagine how it would feel to come to a country where no one spoke your home language and you were surrounded by the language of the country all day long. According to de la Riva Whisler (2015), when newcomer students come to an English speaking school, they are nervous and afraid because no one speaks their language. They

feel isolated and feel that the language barrier hinders them from making friends.

Tonogbanua (2016) studied and interviewed former ELLs who were enrolled in an all-English school. Her results state that newcomer ELLs need more time to translate material and often come to their new country with very few possessions including pictures. She discovered that newcomer students come to school with varying degrees of familiarity with technology and while they are excited at first to learn the language, their enthusiasm fades as tasks become more difficult.

According to DelliCarpini et al. (2009), the best way for schools to support newcomers and their families is to learn as much about their culture, families, and where they come from. Home communication in the student's first language is integral to them feeling welcome in the school. While this helps bridge the gap between school and families, newcomer students still need strategies in reading and writing in order to be successful in school.

Intermediate Learners

Intermediate learners are students who have developed social English well enough to communicate with teachers and peers but are still developing academic language. Sometimes in new situations or academic areas where the student is unfamiliar, they may have gaps in vocabulary knowledge. On the other hand, students at this level can engage in higher order thinking skills in their second language (Ferlazzo & Sypniewski, 2012). According to the WIDA Consortium (2012), these students can use some general and technical language in the content areas as well as a variety of sentence lengths that vary in linguistic complexity. They are able to write multiple related paragraphs and their errors, orally or written, do not impede the meaning of what they are trying to communicate.

When these students are assessed on the WIDA ACCESS language proficiency test, they score between 3.0 and 3.9 (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction EL Policy Handbook, 2021). Oftentimes, teachers believe that these learners can produce more writing and comprehend more reading because their speaking is very fluent and their social English is comparable to that of a native English speaker. But this is not the case. These students are still developing academic language and in order for them to be successful, they need strategies in reading and writing too.

Long-Term English Language Learners

While not much research can be found on intermediate learners, there is more research to be found on long-term English learners. Long-term ELLs make up 25 - 50 % of the student population of a United States school. In the United States, 50 -70 % of long-term English language learners are born in the United States (Kim & Garcia, 2014). Long-term ELLs have well developed social English, but their academic English may not be fully developed (Klein, 2016). In non-academic oral settings, long-term ELLs are near fluent but they may struggle with academic English (Zwiers, 2007). Long-term ELLs function well verbally but don't have oral or literacy skills to achieve academically (Ferlazzo, 2019). They may continue to receive ELL support but have not reached proficiency according to the yearly language test. In order for a student to be considered fully English proficient, they must obtain an overall composite score of 5.0 on the ACCESS for ELLs (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction EL Handbook, 2021). In my experience, long-term learners score on average between 4.0-4.9 on this assessment and according to the WIDA proficiency scales, they are considered an advanced intermediate language learner. These students often struggle with content material in

school. They have a higher rate of dropping out because they struggle to achieve academically (Ferlazzo, 2019), which is especially true for middle school and high school students.

There are many reasons why long-term ELLs fall behind their native English speaking peers. These students fall further behind because the remedial programs they are in do not provide rigorous learning opportunities and therefore the gap widens. Because of these limited opportunities, these students become disengaged, drop out, or are inappropriately referred to special education programs. They lack the academic English to be successful in higher educational settings. There is a gap between what they want to do after high school and the reality of how they perform academically (Kim & Garcia, 2014). Not having access to courses that are appropriate for their language level is a barrier to their success as well (Klein, 2016). Other reasons students don't succeed and fall behind include lack of English development classes specific to their language level, limited access to the standard curriculum, a shortage of professional development for teachers in supporting ELLs, socioeconomic factors, family mobility due to fear of immigration, and lack of regular school attendance (Ferlazzo, 2019).

Long-term ELLs are a unique group of students that need different programming and strategies to bridge the achievement gap with native English speakers. While many English language programs in secondary schools are geared towards newcomers, there are still some strategies that have proven successful for long-term ELLs. Ferlazzo (2019) created a separate support class for long-term ELLs. In this class, the teacher would prepare and teach a lesson on a topic from one of the students' academic classes. He asked teachers to email him information about upcoming lessons, the main topic, and a

little background information on the topic at hand. Social-Emotional Learning was also incorporated and students were assigned a peer mentor. When students were assessed, the group who was enrolled in the intervention support class outperformed in every area assessed including English Language Proficiency (ELP). These cohort students also had a higher rate of attendance and a lower rate of behavioral referrals. Students also ranked that the interventions were helpful. They liked getting a preview of the upcoming lessons, having a peer mentor, and having class together as a cohort (Ferlazzo, 2019).

Long-term ELLs perceive that they need help with English language development and can be successful with the right interventions. With the right support and strategies, it is possible to begin implementing strategies that will close the opportunity gap between long-term ELLs and native English speakers.

Opportunity Gap

There is an opportunity gap, also known as an achievement gap, between non-native speakers of English that is evident and has narrowed very little over the years. English learners continue to have lower academic performance than other subgroups such as African Americans and Native Americans. This gap widens as students get older (Garcia, 2012).

The achievement gap can be defined as a difference in academic performance between two distinct groups of students. Achievement gap statistics can be found by comparing high stakes assessment scores from district and statewide testing, drop out rates, and students who take AP tests (Garcia, 2012). Therefore it is important to discuss the achievement gap in reading and writing between long-term English language learners and native English speakers.

For students to be successful in school and bridge this gap, they need a strong grasp of academic language. Not only do they need to master academic language, but they also need to master higher-order thinking skills. If students want to be successful in professional settings, the acquisition of academic language and higher-order thinking skills is essential. It is important to fill this opportunity gap because as the previous generation retires, the number of workers in essential professional jobs decreases. Today, the population of English language learners, especially Latinos, is increasing and there will be people needed to fill the jobs voided by the retirees. They will need to be successful in school in order to fill this gap in the workforce (Carreira, 2007).

The opportunity gap between English learners and native English-speaking peers has been around for a long time. Many factors contribute to this gap. Families of English learners are unfamiliar with the American school system, there may be a lack of parent involvement in their children's education, and there is a language barrier between the school and the families (Carreira, 2007).

When ELLs begin studying another language like English at a young age, it improves their cognitive development and their self esteem. They are proud that they can speak two languages! But according to Pang (2013), they may be at risk to struggle with both languages later on especially if their native language has a different phonological system than English. These phonological systems affect comprehension directly especially when ELLs do not have enough phonological knowledge in English. Many times, language delay occurs and they struggle with not only comprehension, but phonics, vocabulary, grammar, and storytelling. When ELLs can't understand the vocabulary, they can't understand the sentence or the paragraph. Not only do they need to

understand the meaning, but they need to understand the American culture of the story. Other factors include the lack of a literacy-rich environment at home. Many lack confidence in their English ability due to not speaking it with their families. All of these factors lead to the widening of the opportunity gap as students reach the upper grades in school.

Research shows that mastery of academic language is the key to success in content areas (Carreira, 2007). However, for English learners mastering academic language is difficult and takes much longer than acquiring oral proficiency. Students may be proficient in spoken language but lack academic literacy skills (Carreira, 2007). This is very common among high school and college students, which is why English learners have barriers and challenges to acquiring the academic language that they need for success.

It is sometimes difficult for ELLs to grasp academic language in content areas like math, science, and social studies compared to their English-speaking peers because they are learning the language at the same time. Therefore, they lack the academic language important to content area classes. Low vocabulary levels cannot support grade level reading comprehension and writing (Garcia, 2012). On the contrary, native English speakers focus on content and developing skills such as comprehension, inferring, and summarizing as there is no need for them to learn the language. ELLs must develop conversational skills and basic reading skills at the same time. Plus, they need to develop oral and written academic language skills so they can develop academic knowledge in the classroom (Garcia, 2012).

When ELLs are identified, they are often placed in modified programs with less linguistic and academic rigor. Many programs are not age-appropriate, motivating, or designed with realistic language and literacy development expectations. Traditional school models do not favor ELLs (Garcia, 2012). These educational programs can also contain tracking, segregation, and departmentalized instruction. Tracking, by grouping ELLs in cohorts, gives them a watered-down curriculum that covers content superficially and where higher-order thinking skills are not emphasized, Segregation, where ELLs attend schools where they interact with those who are like themselves, limits English learners exposure to native English speakers and limits them to peers who know the American education system. Departmentalized instruction, in which literacy skills are left to be taught by the English teacher and not across content areas, deprives ELL students of higher-order thinking skills instruction while learning in the content areas. In addition, the schools where they attend may lack resources needed for success and they may be taught by teachers who are unfamiliar with teaching them (Carreira, 2007), as well as inadequately trained staff (Garcia, 2012).

Other barriers include instructional strategies and assessments. There continues to be a lack of research-based instructional strategies for English learners and assessments for determining native language proficiency, progress in English language development, and mastery of academic language in content areas need to be improved. (Garcia, 2012). Because of these difficulties, it is important that ELLs receive explicit and targeted academic literacy instruction at the secondary level (Allison & Harklau, 2012).

There are things schools can do to prepare EL students for success. They first of all need access to a rigorous curriculum. They need to be socialized and educated in the

American education system by learning how to navigate the steps it takes to lead them to their end goal of either attending college or success in the workforce. Schools can also use their cultural and linguistic heritage to their advantage (Carreira, 2007). However, treating ELLs as if they were a native English speaker will not close the gap (Bolos, 2012), but giving them the skills they need for success in the classroom will.

Reading Strategies and Skills

Students use a variety of strategies to understand what they read. English language learners may need different strategies than native English speakers depending on their proficiency level. One strategy could be using cognates from their first language to comprehend what they read in their second language. Cognates are words that come from the same language and have a similar form (Bolos, 2012). Strategies that native English speakers use may include using context clues, eliciting prior knowledge, predicting, visualizing, and inference. Many of these strategies are difficult for ELL students to implement. They may not have the background knowledge available for what they are reading which could lead to difficulty with inferring or visualizing. Because of difficulties such as these, ELL students need explicit instruction in strategies for them to gain confidence and competence (Booth Olson & Land, 2007).

English learners come to school with a variety of skills. Depending on their age, they may come to school with reading skills in their native language. When students can read in their native language, they can use that knowledge to build on learning new English skills (Bolos, 2012), and being proficient in L1 facilitates reading and also writing in a second language (Dressler et. al, 2011). Plus, students who can read in their native language have advantages to learning to read in their second language because

they know how text is organized and its features (Bolos, 2012). If teachers can use a student's home language when teaching reading, the students' linguistic identities are strengthened (Bolos, 2012).

There are two basic skills involved in reading. First, students need to identify and recognize written symbols. Second, they have to understand what the symbols mean. Reading comprehension is the understanding of the written symbols (Qanwal & Karim, 2014). Reading can help ELLs gain an understanding of the American culture as well as learn vocabulary, sentence structure, mechanics, and syntax of the English language (Pang, 2013). Implementing reading strategies make reading an active process rather than a passive one. They also promote the comprehension of written texts (Qanwal & Karim, 2014). There are proven strategies that teachers can use to teach reading to students, including English language learners.

Interactive Read Aloud

When teachers use the interactive read aloud strategy, they read aloud to students every day. When students are read to, the teacher is modeling the reading process as well as comprehension and fluency. This strategy instructs the teacher to make predetermined stops to break up the text into manageable pieces and also lets teachers check for understanding. Pausing allows for time to build background knowledge which makes reading comprehensible and vocabulary easy to understand. Using this technique ensures that the text is chunked into smaller pieces (Bolos, 2012), making it easier for ELL students to understand.

Visuals, Graphic Organizers, and Media

Using visuals such as bilingual picture books helps with understanding the text (Pang, 2013). Oftentimes, there is not a bilingual book available for a text. This can be remedied by making a homemade picture book and adding a notecard with translation in the native language or English to the book. Another important visual strategy is to have students draw a picture of the concept to show that they understand (Pang, 2013).

Graphic organizers help students with organizing and summarizing content. They can also be used for predicting along with checking for understanding (Pang, 2013). There are a variety of graphic organizers that can be used. Successful graphic organizers include ones that tell the beginning, middle and end of a story, problem solving graphic organizers, and cause and effect graphic organizers. Students also benefit from short videos, movies, or games, and also realia (Pang, 2013), where real-life objects are brought into the classroom to share with students.

While these strategies are successful in teaching students how to read, it's important to teach the meaning of vocabulary and basic phonics first which will therefore affect fluency and comprehension development (Pang, 2013). Vocabulary and basic phonics lead to success in comprehension and better comprehension leads to success in the classroom. Comprehension is the skill and strategy needed to understand a text (Qanwal & Karim, 2014). It is making connections with and visualizing the text. It is making inferences and asking questions about the text (Bolos, 2012). This is a skill that many ELLs struggle with and could be in part to how it is taught. Many ELLs may not learn how to comprehend text if it is taught to a large group. There is a better chance that students will learn comprehension if they are taught explicitly in a small group. Learning

in a small group gives ELLs a better chance to interact with the teacher and other students. It is also easier for the teacher to check for understanding and individualize instruction for the students. Comprehension can be taught through shared reading. In this strategy, the teacher reads aloud to model fluency, then the students read the text with the teacher to practice fluency. While the students are reading, the teacher can incorporate think alouds to practice comprehension. Teachers can also use guided reading to support comprehension. Guided reading can be differentiated to students' abilities and it focuses on vocabulary development. It also allows for individual instruction. Plus, many lessons that are already available can be adapted to teach ELLs as long as vocabulary, reading ability, and interest are taken into account (Bolos, 2012).

Studies have been done on comprehension and is one of the reading skills in which content area teachers want support. Qanwal and Karim (2014) wanted to determine if there was a correlation between reading strategy instruction and comprehending text. The researchers studied English learners, both male and female, at the university level in their third, fifth, and seventh semesters. It was conducted through the English department and the three types of comprehension strategies were taught. The first strategies were before-reading strategies where students thought about what they already knew about a topic, set a goal for reading and looked at text structure. The second group of strategies taught by Qanwal and Karim were while-or during-reading strategies where students activated prior knowledge and made connections among ideas. They also took notes, highlighted text, and worked through comprehension issues. The last strategies taught were after-reading strategies where students skimmed the text again, summarized the text, reread the text, or reviewed key points. Qanwal and Karim found a strong correlation

between reading strategy instruction and reading comprehension proficiency. Students who were taught these reading strategies performed better on reading comprehension activities. When students were taught these three strategies, comprehension improved. This study determined that teachers should teach students a variety of reading strategies and the teaching needs to be direct and explicit.

Another important strategy to teach reading to students is vocabulary instruction. Pang (2013) states that it is important to pre-teach vocabulary. Pre-teaching can be done through word walls, student-developed definitions, pictures, realia, and graphic organizers (Bolos, 2012). Students also need context to retain new vocabulary so it is important that words are not taught in isolation. Teachers should rephrase text or ideas into simpler language, let students draw a picture, allow students to discuss the words, and give students sentences and question stems (Bolos, 2012). An important part of vocabulary instruction is the use of cognates. Cognates are words in two languages that have common roots, meanings, and forms that are similar. This native language knowledge can enhance English vocabulary acquisition (Dressler et al., 2011). Dressler et. al also suggested that teaching vocabulary through cognates in reading instruction may be effective in helping students find meaning for challenging vocabulary in English. In her study of fifth grade Spanish speaking students, she found that students who were taught to use cognates as part of their vocabulary development had higher metalinguistic awareness. However, students need to be explicitly taught this strategy in how to use cognates to develop their vocabulary for it to be effective (Dressler et al., 2011).

The question about whether or not students use the strategies also comes into play. If students don't use the strategies they are taught, they may not be able to comprehend

the text which may lead to them not being successful in school. To answer this question, Poole (2010) worked with long-term ELL high school students from Colombia to determine what academic strategies they report using. The strategies measured were how students plan to read and comprehend, problem-solving strategies like using context clues, and supports like using bilingual dictionaries. Poole found that these students used problem-solving strategies like reading slowly, getting back on track, paying closer attention, and re-reading text for understanding most of the time. Overall it was determined that they moderately used reading strategies mentioned above when reading in English.

Writing Strategies

Writing is difficult for many students and second language learners can often fall well below their English speaking peers. Many times ELLs are not taught reading and writing skills needed for high stakes testing like analyzing and interpreting because they feel these skills are too sophisticated for this population (Booth Olson & Land, 2007). However, if the achievement gap is to be narrowed, it is important to teach writing skills and strategies to ELLs.

Teaching writing to ELLs can look much different than teaching writing to native English speakers. As with reading, they may lack the prior experiences that native English speakers have which may make it difficult to complete writing assignments asked of them by their teachers. Therefore, teachers need to use different strategies to make writing comprehensible to English language learners. Many of the same strategies used in reading instruction can be used in writing instruction and learners need to be taught

strategies explicitly if they want to become mature, proficient writers (Booth Olson & Land, 2007).

As with reading instruction, assessing understanding before, during, and after lessons can also be done when teaching writing to students. Students can reread notes. Teachers can use authentic materials to deepen understanding, replace words that lack detail, use word walls and photos as well as label objects to support students in their writing. It is also helpful for teachers to model writing techniques by projecting an example on the screen for students, reading your writing, and using think alouds (Armon & Morris, 2008). Another important strategy teachers can use is to scaffold writing for students. Scaffolding makes content comprehensible for students when a task is out of their reach by deliberately guiding them from concrete to abstract tasks (Booth Olson & Land, 2007). It helps students get their ideas down on paper and students can add ideas to concepts much easier (Sunseri & Sunseri, 2019). According to Booth Olson and Land (2007), a rigorous and challenging curriculum should focus on teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies to students. Booth Olson and Land state that students need to know what the strategy is (declarative knowledge), how to use the strategy (procedural knowledge) and when to use the strategy (conditional knowledge). They should be explicitly taught to use strategies using these three ideas through modeling and guided practice. When teaching using this strategy, Booth Olson and Land found through their study of ELLs in grades six through 12, the students' scores increased from pre- to post-test and students wrote better essays on their post-tests. This is proof that explicit instruction and scaffolding work.

Another strategy that correlates with reading that can be used in writing is using graphic organizers which can easily show conceptual relationships on paper (Sunseri & Sunseri, 2019). It is a great way for students to organize their thoughts. Sunseri and Sunseri examined three student teachers' reading and writing strategies. While these were bilingual Spanish-speaking teachers, their teaching strategies can also be used with monolingual speakers. One strategy used in this study was to have students think out loud about something they had read. She found that if students think out loud, it is easier for them to write their spoken words down. Another student teacher used Spanish vocabulary and cognates to support students' writing and also had students do a free-write daily for ten minutes. The beauty of the free-write was that students did not have to worry about being corrected and they found that when the students wrote more often, their writing improved and they became more at ease with their writing. Because these teachers were actively involved in the learning of their students, the students were active participants. They didn't focus so much on what they couldn't do or understand and since they were highly engaged there is a better chance that they will do better in school.

These findings show that ELLs need support to be successful in mainstream classes since they may lack reading and writing skills to be successful with academic language. Research states that language learners who develop strong literacy skills in their native language during early childhood and elementary school are successful with academic language along with reading and writing skills in mainstream classes. However, more research needs to be done on ELLs who do not receive literacy instruction in early childhood and elementary school in order to provide reading and writing strategies to mainstream teachers that will close the opportunity gap. This brings me back to my

question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

Conclusion

Many classrooms today have ELLs. Research has shown that these students fall behind their native English-speaking peers for many reasons thus creating an opportunity gap. Many times this group lacks literacy in their native language making it difficult to transfer literacy skills to learning English. This is a problem as these students are not able to succeed in middle school and high school.

Teachers are always looking for strategies to specifically address the needs of this group. This project specifically addresses the classroom needs of this group of students and strategies will be shared with teachers. Specifics of the project, a website, will be outlined in Chapter Three beginning with how needs of the teachers will be addressed. This chapter will also outline the project including specific strategies that will be shared with teachers. A site map as well as frameworks used to develop the website will be described. Finally, a description of participants and settings including a timeline will be shared.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Background

Teachers are always looking for new strategies to improve their teaching. When teachers have exhausted everything they have to reach students who are struggling with concepts, they need new strategies. Most of our classrooms today have English language learners. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), the population of English learners in schools in the United States has risen from an average of 8.1% in the fall of 2000 to an average of 10.1 in the fall of 2017. There are English Language learners in every state and many teachers are at a loss as to how to support them. In Wisconsin, the population has more than doubled from 22,542 English learners in 2000 to 49,905 in 2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). While a newcomer may need more visual support, a long-term English learner may need help with comprehension and vocabulary development. Because of these needs, teachers need interventions for them to succeed in the classroom. That is why this project will seek answers for teachers by providing research-based strategies to address these challenges by answering the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

Chapter Overview

As research discussed in Chapter Two shows, there is an opportunity gap between English language learners and native English speakers. According to data from the

National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), only four percent of ELLs scored proficient or higher on state reading assessments from 1998-2019 compared to 34% of English-speaking peers. Not surprisingly, 71% of ELLs scored below basic on the same tests. Because teachers know that this gap exists, they are constantly searching for resources and strategies to help their ELLs in the mainstream classroom.

This chapter will begin by describing the project and then move into discussing the principles behind the design. The participants and setting will be covered by telling who will be involved with this project and where the website will be located. The next section of this chapter will focus on how data will be collected and used, along with the effectiveness of the project. Finally, I will discuss the timeline for the project followed by a summary of the chapter.

Project Overview

To support content area teachers with strategies for supporting ELLs in their classrooms, I designed a website with resources in reading and writing in the classroom. This project idea began when I would have conversations with teachers about their perceptions and needs when working with ELLs in their classes. When I met with teachers this fall, I asked them about their knowledge of and comfort with teaching ELLs in the areas of language levels, ability, and challenges plus using research-based strategies. I also asked them what skills they were looking for to support their students in the classroom. I found out that many of them had a very limited knowledge of ELLs, their language levels ability, and challenges and that they were looking for strategies mainly with comprehension, vocabulary development, summarizing, and writing skills. Using his information, the content of the website was developed based on teachers'

needs. The website includes information on the different levels of ELLs that teachers may have in their classrooms, what their challenges are, and what ELLs can do in regards to language acquisition and academic vocabulary. The strategies that are presented come from a variety of research articles including Bolos (2012) and Pang (2013), along with strategies presented by Ferlazzo and Sypniewski (2012). The strategies are presented in video format so teachers can see the practice in action. Teachers will find a variety of strategies to implement in their classes to support ELLs in reading and writing on the website. These strategies are connected to the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) standards of Language for Social and Instructional Purposes, Language for Language Arts, Language for Mathematics, Language for Social Studies and Language for Science to ensure that students' academic language in these subject areas is developing while they are learning the content. These standards from WIDA's new language development framework published in 2020. The strategies and assessments that are presented to teachers come from research that has been proven to be effective with English language learners.

The ultimate goal of this project provides teachers with a resource with research-based reading and writing strategies to support their lessons to make academic language comprehensible in order to bridge the opportunity gap between ELLs and native English speaking peers.

Framework

User Experience

I consider myself fairly tech savvy and the idea of designing a website was one that I was immediately excited about. When I worked for a previous school district we

used a website design program to develop classroom websites, but I had never developed one from scratch. When faced with this challenge, I reached out to our district IT department to find out what platform would be best for me to use. Our IT director suggested Google Sites since our school uses the Google platform. As I dove into Google Sites, I found it to be very well laid out and user friendly. It offers a wide variety of templates and options. There is also a tutorial that will walk the user through how to use each part of the website. With a little bit of experimenting, I found Google Sites to be very easy to use and developing this website should be seamless.

User experience is important to good website design. Krug (2014) discusses the importance of user experience using a how-to approach that is appropriate for a novice to use. He defines usability as useful - does it do something people need done; learnable - can people figure out how to use it; memorable - can people remember how to use it; effective - does it get the job done; efficient - is the time and effort spent reasonable; desirable - is it something that people want; and delightful - is using it fun and enjoyable.

There are three principles that Krug states as important to building a website. First, websites need to be simple by putting what people are looking for to be self-evident with obvious buttons to 'click' to get to the next place. This is because people skim and scan for what they are looking for and if they get frustrated because they cannot find it, they will give up and look somewhere else. Second, the links that people click on to navigate the website need to be meaningful so that people will know they are headed in the right direction. Users need to have the confidence that they are on track. These can also be referred to as painless clicks. Third, web pages should not be too wordy. Using fewer words reduces the congestion of things on the page, makes the important and

useful content easier to access, and it makes the page shorter which allows the user to see more of the page without scrolling (Krug, 2014).

Another design element Krug suggests web designers keep in mind when creating a website is to take advantage of conventions. This means that developers use design patterns that people are already familiar with. For example, take into account where things are located on a page, how things work on a page, and how things look on a page. Secondly, the designer should create visual cues on the page that are accurately portrayed and show relationships with one another. Pages on the website should be broken up into areas that are clearly defined and links where users should click should be obvious. Finally, limit distractions like a cluttered, unorganized and bright page and ensure that the text that is written is broken up so users can easily scan it. This includes using headings, keeping paragraphs short, highlighting key terms, and using bullet points for lists.

Sitemap

In order to organize a website, a site map can be used to decide where content should be located. The site map for this website, as presented in Appendix B, was designed to contain a homepage with six levels of content. The first tab is titled About Me. This tab gives the reader some background information about me, my education, and my contact information. The Language Levels tab gives the user information about the six language proficiency levels of ELL students as stated in the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors Booklet, Grades 6-8 (2012). The next tab, titled Challenges, discusses some of the challenges from the research that ELLs at each level encounter as they progress through school and live in our community (de la Riva Whisler, 2015; DelliCarpini, 2009; Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012; Tonogbanua, 2016). The Can-Do Descriptors tab uses

WIDA's Can-Do Descriptors as a backdrop and informs the reader about what ELLs are able to do based on their language proficiency level. The next tab, Research Based Strategies, brings users to the next page where each of the subsections of reading or writing skills are located, each with its own clickable button. When users click on those buttons, they are brought to a subsequent page with research based strategies that have been proven to be successful with that particular reading or writing skill. The individual strategies pages contain a short video explanation of the strategy along with printable directions. The final page is called Helpful Hints. This page gives users general classroom help and more ideas for use in the content areas and for language related ideas.

Content

The goal of the website is to provide a place for content teachers to find resource based strategies in reading and writing to help them support the ELLs in their classrooms. Research for the content for teachers comes from a variety of sources. Bolos (2012) outlines classroom-tested strategies for teaching reading to middle school ELLs. One area of reading that teachers would like support with is comprehension. Teachers know that comprehension strategies help students make sense of the text they read through asking questions, visualizing, and inferring. Bolos suggests that teachers can teach comprehension through shared reading. With this strategy, teachers read the text out loud to show fluency and engage students in think-aloud strategies while reading. Another useful strategy is how vocabulary is presented. For ELLs to be successful, vocabulary needs to be presented in simpler language and time needs to be given for them to discuss the vocabulary. Visuals are also very important as well as integrating

vocabulary within reading instruction. Teaching words in isolation should be avoided (Bolos, 2012).

Another successful strategy for ELLs is to use graphic organizers. Pang (2013) presents information about using graphic organizers and other visual strategies to improve reading comprehension. Graphic organizers can help students organize their ideas and comprehend the material read. Pang suggests a variety of graphic organizers that will help students comprehend the material. Graphic organizers have been developed to summarize text, show problems and solutions as well as cause and effect, and organize facts in sequential order. While these graphic organizers are helpful tools, another helpful tool for teaching reading to ELLs, especially Spanish speakers, is the use of cognates. Dressler et al. (2011) discusses how cognates enhance a Spanish speaker's ability to extract meaning from words in English. Cognates are words in two languages that have common roots, meanings, and forms that are similar (Dressler et al., 2010). When students use a think-aloud strategy with cognates, they can 'talk out' the word which helps their understanding. While this strategy works well for understanding, it was more successful when students were able to think aloud and use cognate knowledge. Thus they were able to comprehend the vocabulary better. Ferlazzo and Synnieski (2012) also provide a multitude of strategies for teaching ELLs in the mainstream classroom. They suggest several strategies including the use of visuals, word charts, graphic organizers, and note-taking methods using scaffolds are proven to be successful. These reading and writing strategies have been proven to be successful with ELLs.

Participants and Setting

This website is designed for middle school and high school content area teachers, specialists, and special education teachers, specifically teachers who have ELLs in their classes. The selected teachers come from a medium-sized school district in Wisconsin. The population of the city is around 13,000 and the community is somewhat affluent with many of its residents commuting to the Twin Cities for employment. There are approximately 90 teachers at the middle school and 110 teachers at the high school. The experience of these teachers ranges from those who have just begun their careers to those who have been teaching for over 20 years. The district middle school is made up of 1300 students in grades six, seven, and eight. There are 27 English learners. Four of the students at the middle school are newcomers, one student is an intermediate learner, 12 of the students at the middle school are considered long-term learners, and 10 are on monitoring status. The high school has a student population of 1750 in grades nine through 12. Fourteen of those students are English learners. Seven of the students who are English learners at the high school are newcomers, and the other seven are considered to be intermediate to long-term ELLs as they have been in the program longer than seven years. The ELLs that the teachers have in their classes have an overall language proficiency score of 1.5-4.5 on the WIDA scale. The WIDA proficiency scale ranges from one to six with one being a very beginner to six being considered fully English proficiency. The website, which will support the participants will be linked on our school's professional learning

Project Specifics

Assessment

The effectiveness of this website will be measured by a survey placed on the website for teachers to access after they have visited it. This follow-up survey will measure the effectiveness of the content and will be linked in the form of a Google Form on the website and is presented in Appendix A. Users will be asked to respond to statements rating them on a scale of one (not at all) to five (very satisfied). Teachers will be asked how the website improved their skills regarding working with long-term ELLs as well as increased their knowledge of them. Finally, questions regarding how the website improved the participants' teaching practice, and how the website can be improved will be added.

Timeline

The research began during the fall of 2020 when I met with content area teachers to discuss ELLs that were placed in their classrooms. After collecting information on teachers' needs, the product was developed during the spring semester of 2021. The website will be introduced to staff during the fall of the 2021-2022 school year with the follow-up survey to follow.

Summary

Since many ELLs have a difficult time with reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and writing in the mainstream classroom, teachers are always searching for ideas to help them develop the academic language and skills to comprehend the concepts. Therefore, a website was designed to bring research-based strategies to mainstream teachers of all ELLs. It began by addressing teachers' needs and inquiring about their

perceptions. Then research-based frameworks from Krug were used to design the website which allows teachers to bring strategies into their classroom that will not only increase classroom test scores but narrow the opportunity gap between long-term ELLs and native speakers of English. Through this project the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?* will be answered.

Conclusion

This chapter began with an overview of the project that I have designed to answer the question regarding and writing strategies for mainstream social studies and science teachers who work with long-term ELLs. I have described the audience for the website, where and when the project will take place, and how the project will be implemented, along with researched-based frameworks for designing the project. I have also given an overview of the strategies that will be presented to teachers and how the project will be assessed. In the next chapter, I will reflect on my learnings from this project as a whole and what can be done in the future to address the research question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

As I began to think about the question for my project, I kept coming back to two ideas. First, the experiences that I have had teaching ELLs have always revealed the same issues. In my over twenty years of teaching experience, I have seen similar patterns from year to year with their struggles with reading and writing. While I continue to recognize the need for reading and writing strategies at the newcomer and intermediate levels, the students who are considered long-term English learners continue to need support in literacy as well. Secondly, the support that content area teachers are looking for each school year when they find out that they will have ELLs in their classroom. I find that every year when I introduce classroom teachers to the ELLs they will have in their classroom, they want to know what the best strategies are to support them. This wonder led me to the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?*

At first, I was going to provide a professional development workshop for teachers in my schools, but discovered that a website was much more practical. The purpose of this website is to provide content area teachers with the resources needed for them to support the ELL students in their classes. It is a one-stop place for them to go. This website was developed to support them in finding information about who our ELLs are, what they can do, and strategies to support them with literacy in content area classes.

This chapter will begin by discussing the major learnings gathered from my research as well as challenges along the way. I will continue with a summary of my reviewed literature highlighting what was useful to me in the development of my project. Limitations and implications will be discussed and I will describe how I will communicate the project to colleagues. Finally, I will discuss how the project will benefit the students in our school and create a more equitable education for them in the classroom.

Major Learnings

Last year when I began this journey of completing this research, I was very much overwhelmed. It had been a while since I had done any academic writing, so I was very unsure of how to approach the task. I learned that research can be very tedious and time consuming and that it is very easy to get off topic and drawn into another while searching databases. I also learned that while there is much information to be gathered, there is still limited research in some areas that are important to this project. For example, it was very easy to find information about students who are brand new to a country, but it was much more difficult to find research on students who had been in a country longer than three years but had not yet reached English proficiency. There was also a good amount of research that involved secondary language learners overseas and students who are in bilingual programs, but limited research on literacy strategies for middle school and high school students who are in the United States in English speaking schools where their home language may be the minority language. This led to an in depth study of research searching for the missing pieces.

As discussed in my literature review, my knowledge of the importance of academic language was also solidified. Research states that academic language is the key to success in schools (Carrera, 2007), and our ELLs are behind in developing the academic language to succeed. This leads to problems and challenges including not being able to access higher education, higher drop-out rates, inappropriate curriculum, and not having access to rigorous courses, especially at the high school level. These challenges lead me to want to further my research into helping classroom teachers understand language levels, what language learners can do at each of the levels and how to support them with research based strategies.

As a writer, I was able to refine different writing styles throughout this project. Chapter One allowed me to write in a narrative style reflecting on the countless number of students that I have had over the years and that they are the main reason for this work. Chapter Two challenged me with a different type of writing with learning how to write from a researcher's perspective and organize the information so it is easy to understand along with streamlining the information from so many different sources. Chapter Three allowed me to think about my research in a step-by-step process and discover a framework that fit my needs. Finally, I learned how to develop a website based on a framework that was very user friendly. The type of writing done on the website also differentiated from the chapters as it was much less formal and more about getting the research into a place that is easily accessible and user friendly for all.

When I began this project, I was going to create a set of professional development sessions and teach the teachers about best practices in reading and writing strategies for long term ELLs, students who have been in an ELL program for at least 7 years (Kim &

Garcia, 2014). But I discovered that this platform may not be the most effective and efficient way to get my ideas to staff at my school. Plus, it failed to include ELLs at other levels. Along with excluding groups of students, developing professional development sessions was not the best way to get the information to the teachers. Teachers are very busy and finding the time to schedule the professional development would have been a challenge. That is when the idea of developing a website became clear. With a website, teachers can use it whenever they have time, and it will always be available for them. Professional development sessions do not allow for this flexibility. When I began the project last spring and decided on my topic, I certainly didn't expect to change to a completely different format during the final months of the project. It was a very easy transition, and my literature review still contained viable information.

Review of the Literature

My literature review is the backbone of the content for my project. It includes information on ELLs at the different language levels, a discussion of the opportunity gap and how it is used to compare ELLs to native speakers of English, and research based strategies that are proven to be successful in the classroom. One aspect of bringing information to teachers about ELLs is to inform them about students' language levels. ELLs can be newcomers, intermediate learners or advanced. DelliCarpini et al. (2009) state that newcomers come to a new country with very little to no English and some may even have interrupted schooling. Ferlazzo and Sypniewski (2012) define intermediate students as those who have developed social English well enough to communicate with teachers but are still developing academic language. These students have gaps in vocabulary knowledge but can also engage in higher level thinking skills in their second

language because they have developed enough language to engage in those activities. Kim and Garcia (2014) describe long term learners as students who are near proficient in social English but still lack some academic language. These students have also been in an ELL program for seven years or more. Because they still lack some academic language, they struggle with content in the classroom and fall behind their native English speaking peers. Defining these three types of learners is important to the project as it gives content area teachers a background to the development of their students' English.

Another important aspect of my research was finding out about the reading and writing strategies that researchers found to be effective in the development of students' academic language. After researching, I included many of the strategies outlined in my literature review in my website. Many of the researchers agreed that using cognates, explicitly teaching strategies, and allowing students to think aloud while reading and writing helped them become more proficient in English.

Bolos (2012) states that when students read and write in their native language, they can transfer that knowledge to learning English. This is an advantage to them when learning a second language. She discusses strategies such as interactive reading aloud where teachers model comprehension and fluency, that comprehension needs to be explicitly taught especially in small groups because ELLs struggle with. She also states that pre-teaching vocabulary by using word walls, student friendly definitions, pictures, and realia make the content comprehensible for students.

Booth Olson and Land (2007) suggest that strategies that English speaking students use like using context clues, eliciting prior knowledge, predicting, visualizing, and inferring are difficult for ELLs to implement and therefore need to be taught

explicitly. They cite that scaffolding guides students from concrete to abstract ideas and is helpful with writing tasks and that strategies should be cognitive and metacognitive and taught through a rigorous and challenging curriculum

Dressler et al. (2011) claim that a student's proficiency in their first language increases their ability to read and write in their second language and that students need to be explicitly taught to use reading and writing strategies in order to increase their proficiency.

According to Pang (2013), reading in English helps ELLs understand American culture as well as learn new vocabulary, sentence structure, mechanics, and syntax of the English language. Pang also discusses strategies such as graphic organizers, homemade picture books, using visuals like movies and videos and realia to make content comprehensible as well as the importance of including pre-teaching vocabulary in every lesson.

Qanwal and Karim (2014) state that when teachers implement reading and writing strategies that it makes reading and writing an active process rather than a passive one. They say that comprehension strategies are needed to understand text and make connections and this strategy needs to be explicitly taught. They also discuss using cognates to teach vocabulary as it helps students find meaning with challenging words in English.

Sunseri and Sunseri (2019) explain how graphic organizers help students organize their thoughts and conceptualize relationships as well as it being important for students to think aloud when they are reading or writing. They also express the usefulness of cognates to help students with vocabulary acquisition.

Implications

This website is a resource that gives teachers a place to find information when they may have questions about the ELLs in their classroom. It helps them make informed decisions about how to approach teaching them. It is available anytime they need information and offers many strategies to support them as they work with ELLs in their classrooms.

According to Bolos (2012), small group instruction is one of the best ways for kids to learn. Schools need to know that teachers need to be allowed to work with students in small groups. We are not given enough time with students in our district to work with small groups in content classes. Knowing this information will help teachers advocate for more time for more individualized instruction. Small groups are not just good for ELLs, they are good for all kids.

Limitations

Before I began this project, I informally asked teachers what resources and strategies they would like to have to support ELLs in their classroom. The top three reading strategies teachers requested were comprehension, vocabulary, and summarizing. Teachers also asked for strategies on helping support ELLs with citing text evidence. This type of writing is a huge initiative in our schools and it is a skill that is used across all content areas. However, it was very difficult to find any information to support ELLs specifically with finding text evidence. Therefore, more research could be done on that specific topic.

There was also a lack of information on intermediate language learners and limited information on secondary students and literacy, especially those in United States

schools where English is the majority language. It would be beneficial to explore these areas in the future.

Future Research

While there is research to be found on newcomers and long-term learners, there was very little research on intermediate learners. Once students get to the point where they can speak social English proficiently, there is a perception that they are proficient in English. Little do people know that these intermediate learners are still very much developing their academic language and have many years to go before they reach proficiency. Therefore, more research needs to be done on intermediate learners and how to support them in content area classes when they are past the newcomer level and not yet proficient in English. More research also needs to be done with high school students who are new to the country and come to an English only speaking school as opposed to a bilingual school.

Communicating Results

This website will be rolled out in the fall of 2021 to middle school and high school staff. I will be working with the IT department to get it published on professional learning sites for my schools in our district. It will also be shared directly with teachers who have ELLs in their classes. Every fall, I meet personally with teachers who will have my students in their classes and the sharing of this website will be a part of these meetings. While the strategies and research is largely devoted to middle school and high school students, I will also share this website with our Student Services department as well as my ELL colleagues who teach at the elementary schools.

Benefit to the Profession

This project will provide teachers with a resource devoted to information about ELLs in our schools. It includes background information on ELL and their levels, information on what ELLs can do, and strategies in comprehension, vocabulary, summarizing, and writing. Not only will the website benefit teachers by giving them access to resources at their fingertips, but it will provide the students in their classes better access to the academic language needed to be successful in school.

Summary

When my ideas for this project began, I reflected on the many students who I have had in the past. Students like Miguel, a newcomer to the high school at 16 with no English proficiency and how he struggled with the core content. Then there was Aden, who came to the United States as a fourth grader and reached English proficiency by the end of middle school. Finally Rosa, who has been in United States schools since kindergarten and still struggles with reading and writing. This snapshot of the diverse needs that my students led me to find research based strategies in literacy to support classroom teachers with their needs and to the question: *What are the best practices in reading and writing for content area teachers that make academic language accessible to middle school and high school ELLs which will result in increasing proficiency on standardized tests and close the opportunity gap?* The core of my research to answer this question was to dig into research based reading and writing strategies that have been proven successful with ELLs in content area classes. Along with finding these strategies, I reviewed information about the proficiency levels that ELLs can present, as well as the opportunity gap that exists between ELLs and native English speaking peers. There were

also limitations such as time and human resources that may hinder in allowing teachers to use these ideas, but the core work of this project, the strategies, will benefit both teachers and students in our school district. This project offered some personal learnings as well. I learned that research is tedious and oftentimes it takes a while to get to what you are looking for. A researcher needs to be patient and have the determination to find out the needed information. These two qualities of a good researcher were strengthened for me.

Overall, completing this project has been a positive experience. Most importantly, I am excited to share this research with my school with the overall goal of student success in academic language.

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APPENDIX A

Website Usability Survey Questions

The website increased my knowledge of ELLs and what they can do.

The website increased my knowledge of the barriers ELLs face.

The content on the website is relevant and I can use the strategies presented in my classroom.

The website is engaging and easy to use.

How will this website enhance your teaching practice?

How can this website be improved?

What additional types of strategies or professional development are you looking for to support ELLs in your classroom?

APPENDIX B

Project Sitemap

