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## A High School Economics Course Curriculum That Effectively Integrates Language and Content Instruction for English Learners

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A High School Economics Course Curriculum That Effectively Integrates  
Language and Content Instruction for English Learners

by

Jennifer Weddell

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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To my past, present and future students. You challenge me and inspire me. May we all be curious and open-minded lifelong learners.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Sonya's Experience

One of my students walked into our classroom that day without her usual friendly greeting and bright smile. "How was econ today?" I asked her, as I usually would, since she had that class just before mine each day. To my surprise, her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head from side to side. "Can I drop that class, or take it online instead?" she asked me.

Sonya (not her real name) was a few weeks into her senior year of high school, and just starting her third year in the United States. She was a confident student with a self-deprecating humor that could mask the frustration and struggles she sometimes experienced. She had excelled academically in her native country, including studying English. But studying a language as an academic subject and using it for learning every day are not the same. When Sonya moved to the United States at the end of 9th grade, her academic English proficiency was in the Level 1 (Entering) range, as determined by the WIDA language proficiency screener (WIDA, 2022). Sonya was a motivated student who was making consistent progress in her English proficiency, and she continued to excel academically when provided with appropriate language support. Entering her senior year, she was considered a Level 3 (Developing) English learner (EL), based on her most recent statewide English proficiency assessment (WIDA, 2022). That fall, Sonya was taking an economics class that would fulfill a state-mandated graduation requirement. There were a total of four EL students in this particular class that semester, and our most experienced EL paraprofessional (para) was assigned to provide in-class support for these

EL students. This meant that the para attended every class, took notes, and was available to provide one-on-one assistance during class, as needed. Our high school uses a variety of methods for supporting our EL students, depending upon many factors which include student proficiency level, availability of existing modified materials, and content teacher experience and comfort level with differentiation for EL students. In this particular economics class, the in-class para drew on her experience to support individual students based on their unique language profiles. The para knew the course materials well, having supported EL students in this same course many times in previous years. In addition, she and I would periodically review the upcoming assignments and assessments, and discuss the appropriate modifications and supports for each student. Based on my knowledge of each student's unique situation, the para's ten-plus years of experience, and our frequent consultations, I trusted the para's judgment with regard to in-class EL supports.

Sonya's uncharacteristic discouragement and sadness that day had occurred after the classroom teacher asked her to respond orally to a short video clip that had just been shown to the class. Students were to mentally review a set of economic concepts that had just been introduced and described in a lecture (during which Sonya took notes by writing down in her notebook the terms and definitions that were shown in a slide presentation on the screen), and then decide which of these concepts was best illustrated by the video clip, which showed banter between characters in a brief scene from a popular 1990's American television sitcom. As Sonya's brain sought to process the course content input that she had read, written, and heard a few minutes earlier, then make meaning of that information, and *then* to shift to understanding the social and informal register of the TV characters' fast-paced debate, followed by connecting these two



separate threads of understanding and representing them with a newly-learned economic concept, she froze. The para recognized immediately what was going on, and decided to narrow the scope of what Sonya needed to process. The para pointed at Sonya's notes to give Sonya a clue about which economic concept to consider. The classroom teacher stopped her with the admonition that he wanted to challenge Sonya. With the whole class watching, Sonya quickly made a guess, and soon the teacher moved on to another student. Sonya was left feeling confused about the new material, and distressed about being put on the spot to make a connection she could almost certainly have made, had she been learning in her first language and with a familiar cultural reference. This experience singled her out in a way that made her feel inferior, foolish, and misrepresented. Sonya was smart, capable, and ready to learn, but the existing methods were neither serving her nor some of her classmates as well as they should have. This incident was particularly memorable, but it is not unlike the experiences that many English learners have in a variety of mainstream content classes. Teachers of these classes usually have good intentions, and some have the necessary experience or training to provide appropriate language supports and modifications, but in many cases, the existing materials and methods leave English learners struggling to comprehend.

### **Cognitive Load**

EL students must both acquire academic English and learn academic content. With a dozen or more different first languages among the EL population in our school, the most efficient and effective way to meet these two educational goals is to use a combination of direct academic English instruction, sometimes referred to as standalone ESL (English as a Second Language), but described in our school as English Language

Development (ELD), along with sheltered instruction in content classes. Sheltered instruction embeds academic language learning into core curricular instruction. This method allows EL students to increase their academic English proficiency through meaningful participation and engagement with their peers in their core content classes, instead of primarily through segregated, EL-only support classes (Echevarría et al., 2014; Hansen-Thomas, 2008; Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos & Himmel, 2016).

Sonya's experiences, and those of so many other EL students, compel me to ask: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?* Using research on best practices for meaningful content instruction for secondary English learners, I will develop a curriculum for a high school economics course. The curriculum will be designed with English learners in mind, but all students will benefit, because all students are academic language learners.

### **My Professional Journey**

I have not been a classroom teacher for my whole career. Teaching, in fact, is my third separate career phase, though it is the one I had long been expecting, and the one I continue to love the most. I started my professional life as a numbers person. I majored in economics with a minor in mathematics in my undergraduate education, and although I graduated with honors, I was entering the abysmal job market of 1991 and I was uncertain about both my career prospects and goals. This prompted my first exploration of teaching as a career. I prepared to go to graduate school, with a route toward either teaching economics at the college level, or pursuing a high school math or social studies teaching license. Instead, a series of circumstances led me to taking and passing the first

actuarial exam, paving my way into my first career. For the next ten years, I worked in the actuarial and accounting departments of two different large insurance companies, doing statistical modeling and other spreadsheet and database-centric work.

Following this period, I shifted gears and moved into the nonprofit sector. I wanted to do more meaningful work that had a positive, direct impact on others, and I found this at a research and advocacy organization that focused on state policy and budget issues, including public education. As I became well-versed in the policies and politics around public education and all its diverse stakeholders, I came to understand that the most immediately impactful education work that I could do would be to get closer to the action, so I finally made the leap into teaching. About seven years into my public policy career, I started taking evening classes toward my initial teaching license, leaving aside my prior expectations of math or social studies, and instead choosing the K-12 ESL license, as languages have long been a significant area of interest for me. For the next two years I continued my public policy work while I took at least one class each semester, until I left that job to transition into full-time student teaching in the fall of 2015.

### **From Theory to Practice**

I love to learn, and I love to absorb knowledge. During my teacher preparation classes, I eagerly applied myself to learning each new aspect of my future role as a teacher of English learners. From the history of American public education, to educational psychology, to theories of language acquisition and fundamentals of literacy and grammar, to teaching methods and lesson planning, I developed my knowledge base and began stocking my mental toolbox for my future teaching position. I gained a valuable range of experience in my two student teaching assignments: first at a diverse

urban high school with more than 200 EL students and five full-time EL teachers, followed by a suburban elementary school with about 25% EL students and a Free and Reduced Price-eligible population of more than 30% (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2021d, 2021f). Over 16 weeks of student teaching, I collaborated with seven other EL teachers, and several content or classroom teachers. I worked closely with more than 100 different EL students spanning Level 1 newcomers to Level 5 students on the cusp of exiting the EL program. I eagerly brought this knowledge and experience into my first job, a long-term substitute position at a suburban elementary school, and by the end of that school year, I had secured a full-time position at a large suburban high school with a small but growing EL population. My position would be the only EL teacher in the building, serving a total of 19 English learners. While I had several EL teacher colleagues in other buildings across my district, I would be a department of one in my building.

That first year, I taught English Language Development (ELD) and English Language Support (ELS), and had a flexible period for working with higher-need students and doing some collaboration and materials modification with a small group of content teachers. Each year since, the EL population in our school has steadily and rapidly grown, and we now have a roster of nearly 70 students in grades 9 through 12. As a group, the EL students in our school now typically learn in the classrooms of more than 50 different content and elective teachers. Close, effective collaboration with this many teachers is simply unrealistic, which creates a sort of triage operation, where students are sent to the EL classroom by the content teacher for help with a particular assignment or assessment. A significant disadvantage with this method is that modifications are often made to mainstream assignments on a student-by-student, as-needed basis, which is very

inefficient, and contributes to a work-completion mentality rather than keeping the focus on learning and understanding. Instead, language-based modifications should be made thoughtfully and purposefully, to allow the student to meet the content learning objective while developing their English proficiency (Kareva & Echevarría, 2013). An additional drawback of this resource room model is that it cannot reach every EL student in every content class. This leaves students unsupported and struggling to complete the same workload as a native English speaker, resulting in grades that reflect English language proficiency, rather than content learning.

### **A New Approach is Needed**

I am fortunate to work with a great number of amazing teachers. I have developed collaborative relationships with many content teachers over the last five years, including co-teaching a geometry class with one of our math teachers. Most teachers with whom I work welcome this collaboration, and many already have some experience with language objectives, scaffolding strategies, and other principles of sheltered instruction. As our EL population continues to grow, we will need to rely more on these content area teachers to be language teachers as well, with academic language learning embedded into core curricular instruction. Course curricula that have remained mostly static for years will need reconsideration and revisions. As our overall student body continues to grow in diversity, the features of a sheltered instruction model will validate, engage, and benefit all students. These features include building background through explicit links to students' experiences; sufficient wait-time and appropriate pacing; a comprehensive review of key vocabulary and concepts; frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion; and opportunities for students to apply their learning in both language and

content knowledge, using all language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Echevarría et al., 2014). A redesigned content course curriculum based on these principles is the next step in building a more effective EL program at my school.

### **Summary**

Chapter One introduced one of my former EL students, through an experience she had that inspired my research topic and question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?* The chapter included an overview of the professional pathway that brought me to this point, and provided details and support for my rationale for the type of project I have chosen. Rapidly increasing EL populations in many schools, specifically the high school where I teach, require a new and expanded approach to teaching these students academic content while supporting their developing English proficiency.

Chapter Two will present a review of literature on several areas of research that impact my research question, including theories of second language acquisition, common barriers to learning for secondary EL students, the academic standards that apply to secondary EL students, and effective methods of content instruction for English learners. Chapter Three will outline the methodology used to develop the project and will include a detailed description of the project itself. Chapter Four will provide a reflection on the project, including the research and development process, the implications and limitations of the project, and next steps regarding use of the project or additional related work to be considered.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature in four topic areas, and make connections between these areas to help me formulate an answer to my research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?*

The first topic I explore is theories of second language acquisition, in order to ground my curriculum project in a strong foundation. The second topic in this chapter focuses on barriers to learning for English learners. These barriers can be categorized broadly as stereotypes and misunderstandings, differences in background knowledge and culture, and content course teachers who lack EL-specific experience or training. Understanding and removing barriers to learning for English learners will be an important element of the answer to my research question. The third topic reviewed is academic standards, with an emphasis on the economics standards that are required for high school students in Minnesota, as well as the English language development standards outlined and recently updated by the WIDA Consortium (formerly World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, now simply known as WIDA), which support the academic English proficiency of EL students. A successfully designed curriculum must satisfy the learning expectations mandated by the State of Minnesota for secondary English learners. Finally, I review and discuss methods and strategies for effectively teaching both content material and academic English to secondary EL students, with reference to the learning theories, barriers, and standards presented in the first three sections of this chapter.

## **Theories of Second Language Acquisition**

This section conducts an overview of second language acquisition theories. Research and understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) is a relatively new field. First language acquisition has been studied and explained through theories of learning such as behaviorism, innatism, and cognitive development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As researchers began to extend these frameworks to understanding the process of SLA, new theories were developed that draw on cognitive psychology and sociocultural theory (Lavadenz, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). There is no single, unified theory for SLA, but there are a number of common principles that have emerged (Lavadenz, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013), which I highlight in the following subsections. These principles can be grouped into categories, or perspectives, that relate to broader theories of human learning. In this research I compare and contrast principles from three different perspectives on SLA: innatist, cognitive, and sociocultural. I will describe the relevant hypotheses and models of key psychologists and linguists whose work provides a foundation for the best practices for teaching English learners that will be explored in later sections.

### ***Innatist Perspective***

The innatist perspective is based upon the idea that all children are born with an internal universal grammar (UG), which facilitates their innate ability to develop language (Lavadenz, 2010). Virtually all children will acquire, at minimum, the ability to use the basic patterns of the language (or languages) they are exposed to in their environment (Gass, 2003). This innatist theory of first language acquisition influenced Krashen's (1982) collection of five hypotheses about second language acquisition, which



came to be known as the monitor model (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). One of these five hypotheses, the comprehensible input hypothesis, expanded on the UG principle that children only need exposure to language in their environment (called *input*). This hypothesis states that SLA occurs when the learner is exposed to language that is understood but also slightly beyond his or her current proficiency level (Lavadenz, 2010). Another element of the monitor model, the affective filter hypothesis, addresses the negative feelings, or affect, that the learner must overcome in order to successfully acquire language. A learner who is nervous, bored, or uneasy will have a metaphorical, or affective, barrier that prevents input from being comprehensible, hindering language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The three remaining hypotheses in the monitor model propose the following: natural acquisition of language rather than learning through conscious attention and formal instruction; acquisition of language features in a predictable and fixed sequence; and a so-called monitor system for applying learned grammar rules (Krashen, 1982). All five hypotheses have faced challenges from other researchers for a variety of reasons, primarily that the hypotheses are not testable, and that they do not explain the many exceptions to what he proposes (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, the comprehensible input and affective filter hypotheses do offer connections to theories in the cognitive and sociocultural perspectives described in the following subsections.

### ***Cognitive Perspective***

The cognitive perspective on language acquisition grew out of the discipline of cognitive psychology in the 1990s (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). According to this perspective, human learning relies on brain functions like perceiving, categorizing,

memorizing, and generalizing. These brain functions contribute to learning a variety of new information, tasks, and skills, and can thus be used to explain the ability to acquire an additional language (Woolfolk, 2014).

A number of cognitive psychologists and linguists have proposed second language learning theories and hypotheses that are rooted in this cognitive perspective. Schmidt (1990), Swain (2000), and Gass (2003) have argued for conversational interaction as an essential component of second language acquisition. In other words, it is not enough to simply receive input that is comprehensible, but the learner's brain must also facilitate interactive activities in order to develop language proficiency. Long (1983) agreed with Krashen (1982) that comprehensible input is necessary for language learning, but Long also proposed that the cognitive process of making the input comprehensible is essential. Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis posits that when a less proficient speaker of a language interacts with a higher proficiency speaker, the resulting negotiation for meaning is key to the development in the lower proficiency speaker. The higher proficiency speaker will recognize that the other participant needs a modification of output in order to understand, and the conversation is sustained by this continuous modification of interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). These modifications can include comprehension checks (asking "did that make sense?" or "do you understand?"); clarification requests ("can you repeat that?"); or rephrasing and paraphrasing ("I need to return the book to the library. I'm going to the library. I need to return the book.") (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Swain's (2000) comprehensible output hypothesis recognizes the role that *output* (primarily the act of *speaking*, in this hypothesis) has in language development. When

two interlocutors are grappling with language learning, the goal of mutual understanding can only be met by reaching for a way to express themselves so as to be understood. This effort causes the learners to stretch themselves and in effect, expands their ability to use the new language (Swain, 2000). This conversational interaction offers the learner important opportunities to experiment with language forms and structure while providing valuable real-time feedback from the conversation partner (Ariza & Hancock, 2003).

These theories and hypotheses are based on principles of cognitive learning, but they also involve interaction between the language learner and at least one other person. This context provides a natural link to the theories of the third and final perspective reviewed here, the sociocultural perspective.

### ***Sociocultural Perspective***

Vygotsky, who first described and elaborated on sociocultural theory (as cited in Woolfolk, 2014), believed that cognitive development is heavily influenced by—perhaps even created by—social interactions in cultural settings (p. 63). A key theme of sociocultural theory is that learning happens in the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*, in which learners co-construct knowledge through their interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD must be challenging enough for the learner to grow, but not beyond what they are capable of learning with support from their interlocutor (Lavadenz, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). When SLA is considered through the sociocultural perspective, connections to the cognitive perspective are clear. The interaction and comprehensible output hypotheses are both centered on conversation between learners, where the language learning is facilitated by the interaction, while the learning process is taking place in the individual learner's brain (Long, 1983; Swain, 2000). The sociocultural

perspective places this same process in a wider context, where the learning is occurring through social interaction. Swain (2000) connected the cognitive activity of the original output hypothesis with the natural social activity that provides the context for the interaction, and proposed a concept called *collaborative dialogue* (p. 97). This is where language learners work together to notice and fill gaps in their linguistic knowledge as they are conversing around a task or problem. Swain's (2000) research showed that this collaborative dialogue contributed to new or improved language proficiency in learners.

According to Lantolf (2012), a key concept of the ZPD is that of *mediation*. He explains that the ZPD depends upon the group, or partner, dynamic to co-construct new understanding and together generate a higher level of expertise. In a classroom setting, this does not imply that the teacher is the expert and the student will learn by imitating what is taught; rather, the student will build on the expertise of the teacher through interaction with the teacher, or other students, to contribute to the growth of their own understanding (Lantolf, 2012).

Through the lens of sociocultural theory, SLA uses a cognitive process that is influenced by the social activity and cultural context of the learner and his or her interlocutors (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Collaborative dialogue is mediated in the zone of proximal development, where each interlocutor contributes to the process of developing expertise, with scaffolding being provided to one another, resulting in the creation of new knowledge (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Swain, 2000).

### ***Summary of Second Language Acquisition Theories***

The field of second language acquisition is a relatively new area of research, with hypotheses and theories continuing to be proposed, tested, and challenged. While there is

no single proven framework for understanding how second (or additional) languages are learned, several common principles have emerged. In this section, I identified several of these elements of second language acquisition theories that draw from the cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, and these provided a grounding in theory for the development of my project. In the next section I explore the various barriers to learning that English learners face in their high school courses.

### **Barriers to Learning for Secondary English Learners**

English learners face multiple challenges to success at the secondary level. They must simultaneously increase their academic English proficiency while learning content, typically taught in English, that is required for high school graduation (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, & U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division [USED & USDOJ], 2015). They often must do this in an environment that includes cultural and social differences which can contribute to biases, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. EL high school students who have not grown up in the United States or attended American schools do not have the same historical and cultural background knowledge that their classmates have. The content teacher may not have experience or training in effective methods for teaching English learners in the mainstream classroom. This section will explore some of these types of barriers to learning as a way to understand what must be considered in proposing a solution.

### ***Stereotypes and Misunderstandings***

English learners are not a homogeneous group. The use of this single term to encompass all students learning English as an additional language masks the incredible diversity of backgrounds and experiences within this group. The EL student is most often

identified first by home language and English proficiency level, although beyond these factors lie as many distinctions as there are for any other population of students. Students differ by their socioeconomic status, their educational background and literacy level, their special education eligibility, and their personal characteristics, strengths, and challenges (Wright, 2010).

**Misperception and Bias.** Although many EL students are born outside the United States, a majority are born in this country. However, because it is often assumed that English learners are not U.S. citizens, immigration-related issues in the news seep into the school environment, affecting perceptions of EL students (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). English learners often live in homes where no adult is proficient in English, making it difficult for monolingual English-speaking teachers to communicate with families in their preferred manner. This language barrier between school and home creates distance and weakens the potential links between teachers and families, resulting in lost opportunities for greater student support and engagement (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

A teacher's disconnection from the student's home and family can lead to assumptions about limited social and intellectual resources for the student, which in turn can lower academic expectations (Díaz-Rico, 2013). This deficit view is based on seeing only what the student or family lacks, causing a bias, often subconscious, towards English proficiency as a predictor of academic potential (Ballantyne, 2008; Díaz-Rico, 2013; Staehr Fenner, 2014).

**Silent Period.** Another factor that can create misconceptions about EL students' language proficiency is their classroom talk, or lack thereof (Wright, 2010). Students who

are relatively new to English typically experience a *silent period* when they are faced with a new environment, whether a new school or just a new class or teacher at the start of a semester (Wright, 2010). This is a time when students are absorbing the language through listening, developing receptive English skills which will support the eventual production of spoken and written English (Staehr Fenner, 2014; Wright, 2010). This reluctance to speak can be misinterpreted in a number of ways: the student is not paying attention; the student isn't learning; the student is unable to participate in a meaningful way in class. All of these misinterpretations can be harmful to the student (Staehr Fenner, 2014; Wright, 2010).

**Social language.** At the other end of the scale, a teacher may observe an English learner chatting comfortably with a friend before class or in the hallway, or the teacher may have a brief, informal conversation with the student on the way into the classroom, creating the perception of English fluency. These scenarios are examples of interpersonal social English, which is acquired much faster than the academic English required for scholarly purposes (Cummins, 2016; Díaz-Rico, 2013; Wright, 2010). While new-to-English students who are immersed in an English-only environment can expect to develop social, conversational fluency in about two years, it can take five to seven years, or more, to acquire a level of academic English proficiency that will allow full engagement in content coursework at the same level as non-EL peers (Cummins, 2016; Díaz-Rico, 2013; Wright, 2010).

### ***Differences in Background Knowledge and Culture***

In a high school classroom filled with students who have mostly grown up in the United States, and often within the local school district area, a mainstream teacher might

assume that all students share the same general background knowledge. This creates a barrier to understanding for English learners who do not have access to the cultural and historic context of the lesson (Staeher Fenner, 2014). An economics lesson about certain food items as complementary goods may not make sense to an EL student whose culture does not include peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. A lesson that assumes knowledge of the U.S. election process may confuse students who have recently arrived from a country without a democratic government (Haynes & Zacarian, 2010). In a study of three middle school English language arts classes, Yoon (2008) found that English learners whose teachers emphasized American cultural references such as football and popular television shows in their lessons were more likely to be withdrawn and disengaged from class, causing their teachers to perceive them as poor students. In contrast, the EL students in this study whose teacher emphasized multicultural inclusivity and actively sought to learn about the students' cultures experienced a sense of belonging and actively participated in class.

**School Culture.** Cultural differences between education systems of various nations are plentiful. Concepts and conventions of American schools like bell schedules, teacher-student interaction expectations, dress codes, and interpersonal communication norms of distance, voice level, and eye contact can all create discomfort and disconnection for English learners who are new to the United States (Ballantyne, et al., 2008). Methods of instruction, learning, and assessments vary across countries and cultures. Students in China and some Middle Eastern countries must typically memorize a large quantity of factual information (Derderian-Aghajanian & Cong, 2012). Classrooms in these countries are teacher-centered and assessments consist of high-stakes



exams. In an American high school, students may use collaboration to solve complex or abstract problems or debate issues, and assessments may be a written test, a project, or a presentation. Students who are not accustomed to these methods of learning can find them confusing or intimidating (Derderian-Aghajanian & Cong, 2012).

A mainstream or content teacher's attitude towards EL students is a critical factor in overcoming cultural differences, which can turn barriers into opportunities to engage the student (Staehr Fenner, 2014). Teachers who model cultural curiosity and open-mindedness and who encourage and support full participation of English learners in their classes tend to have mainstream students who welcome and interact with their EL peers (Yoon, 2008). A welcoming teacher is an important starting point; however, teachers may lack adequate experience or training in effective methods for teaching English learners, which leads to the next type of barrier to learning for EL students.

### ***Content Teacher Lack of EL-Specific Experience or Training***

English learners at the high school level typically spend the majority of their school day in mainstream classrooms, that is, in classes taught by teachers who are not trained EL specialists. Because EL students are learning both content and English throughout the entire school day, it is clear that all teachers—not only EL teachers—share responsibility for the education of English learners (Gibbons, 2009; Harper & de Jong, 2004; Staehr Fenner, 2014).

**Teacher Attitudes and Preparation.** Mainstream teachers' attitudes towards teaching English learners vary, though a majority hold a neutral to positive view (Mitchell, 2016; Reeves, 2006). These attitudes do not necessarily correlate to an accurate understanding of language acquisition. In similar studies conducted ten years

apart, both Reeves (2006, p. 138) and Mitchell (2016, p. 92) found that a majority of mainstream teachers believe, incorrectly, that English learners should be able to acquire English within two years of enrolling in school in the United States. They also found that a majority of mainstream teachers did not feel adequately prepared to work with English learners. Even when mainstream teachers welcome EL students in their classrooms and believe they are equipped for effective instruction of EL students, a number of common misconceptions remain. Effective instruction for English learners is often equated with general principles of good teaching practice such as activating prior knowledge, providing a language-rich classroom environment, employing cooperative learning activities, and scaffolding with tools such as graphic organizers (Harper & De Jong, 2004). While these strategies can all be effectively used with English learners, they must be paired with an understanding of the explicit needs of EL students' language development. Before EL students can meaningfully interact with non-EL peers in a learning activity, specific language structures necessary for the academic task must be taught (Harper & De Jong, 2004).

**The Language of Content Classes.** Content teachers are experts in a particular subject area, and likely do not see themselves as language teachers. However, academic content is learned through specialized language, which must be taught—not only the key vocabulary, but the language structures and grammatical forms that are used to understand and convey information in the content area (Echevarría et al., 2014). English learners need explicit instruction in this specialized language along with their content instruction, but a majority of non-EL teachers with EL students in their classrooms lack training in doing so effectively (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Fewer than half of all states

require any EL-specific training for teachers, although federal law requires that school districts provide "research-based professional development to any teachers, administrators, and staff who work with ELLs" (Education Commission of the States, 2014, para. 1).

### ***Summary of Barriers to Learning***

English learners face a multitude of barriers to learning in their journey toward high school graduation. In this section I reviewed the research on some common barriers to learning that EL students face in high school. These barriers must be seen, understood, and systematically addressed if English learners are to meet the learning expectations of their teachers, school, and the state. In the next section I explore these expectations by reviewing the standards for learning set forth by the state for secondary English learners.

### **Academic Standards**

The State of Minnesota has adopted sets of academic standards which guide the expectations for learning in public K-12 schools statewide. Standards are created by subject area—English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, and the arts—and are reviewed on a 10 year cycle. Standards are categories or summaries of expected student learning, and are subdivided into benchmarks, each of which describe a particular knowledge or skill (MDE, 2021a). To graduate from high school in Minnesota, students must successfully complete all required academic standards in the 9-12 grade band, as well as earn a minimum of 21.5 course credits. A course credit, as defined by the state, represents one academic year of study (MDE, 2021c).

Instruction for English learners in Minnesota K-12 public schools is also guided by the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) standards (MDE, 2021b). These ELD standards were updated in 2020, and address five strands: social and instructional language, and the language necessary for academic success in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The ELD standards framework is grounded in the belief that content and language are best learned together (WIDA, 2020).

This section reviews and discusses the economics academic standards that are required for high school students in Minnesota, the ELD standards for social and instructional purposes and the content area of social studies, and how these content standards and language development standards can be connected and aligned to best serve secondary English learners.

### ***Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies***

The current Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies (known as the 2011 standards) were adopted in May 2013 and required to be fully implemented for the 2013-14 school year. The social studies standards are currently undergoing their decennial review, revision, and rulemaking process, with the new standards not expected to be fully implemented until the 2026-27 school year (MDE, 2021g). As of early 2022, the Minnesota Department of Education has begun the statutory rulemaking process on the third draft of the social studies standards (MDE, 2021g).

The 2011 standards include the disciplinary strands of citizenship and government, economics, geography, and history, which are organized into standards and benchmarks (MDE, 2013). The new standards retain these four strands, and add a fifth strand: ethnic studies (MDE, 2021h). Students must earn 3.5 credits in social studies to

graduate, which can be offered through separate courses for each discipline, or in any interdisciplinary manner that covers all of the standards and benchmarks. The amount of content covered by the standards corresponds to the 3.5 credits (or 7 semesters) in the graduation requirement (MDE, 2013).

Economics is referred to in the standards as disciplinary strand two, or *Strand 2*. Within Strand 2 there are five substrands, or categories, and 12 standards (MDE, 2021h). The high school standards represent broad concepts, anchored in college and career readiness, and may be repeated at different grade levels or grade bands. Each of the 12 standards in Strand 2 contains one or more benchmarks, which are the unique, specific learning outcomes that students must master (MDE, 2013).

While discussion of academic expectations and content guidelines most often refer to standards, it is at the benchmark level that the student is most directly engaged (WIDA, 2020). Standards are conceptual and broad, while benchmarks are action-based. The Strand 2 benchmarks use these action verbs: *apply, establish, evaluate, explain, identify, define, describe, analyze, measure, compare and contrast* (MDE, 2013). Because this is the level at which students engage in the content standards, benchmarks provide a bridge to the second set of academic standards that impact secondary English learners, the ELD standards.

### ***WIDA English Language Development Standards***

In 2011, Minnesota joined the WIDA Consortium and adopted WIDA's English Language Development standards (MDE, 2021b). These standards are high-level statements that summarize and reflect the expectations for students who are learning English as a second (or additional) language (WIDA, 2020). There are five standards

statements, two of which are relevant to the scope of this paper: ELD Standard 1, social and instructional purposes, and ELD Standard 5, the content area of social studies (WIDA, 2020).

Much like the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards, the ELD standards are conceptual and broad. WIDA recently expanded the organization and presentation of these standards, adding new details and resources for educators, to make explicit the need to integrate language and content in the implementation of the ELD standards in practice (WIDA, 2020).

Standard 1 states: "English language learners communicate for Social and Instructional purposes within the school setting" (WIDA, 2020, p. 9) and Standard 5 states: "English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Social Studies" (WIDA, 2020, p.9). These standards, while straightforward and clear, are only the starting point. The guidance for educators in how to effectively use these standards is encompassed in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, which is anchored in the five standards statements and includes additional details for key language uses, language expectations, and proficiency level descriptors (WIDA, 2020).

While the ELD standards are the same for all grades from kindergarten through grade 12, the standards framework details are specific to grade-level clusters. The clusters are: Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grades 2-3, Grades 4-5, Grades 6-8, and Grades 9-12 (WIDA, 2020). This paper will focus on the Grades 9-12 cluster.

The key language uses established in the standards framework are: *narrate*, *inform*, *explain*, and *argue*. These language uses were identified to represent the groups

or families of genres (e.g., biographies, memoirs, lab reports, essays, mathematical arguments) that are found across academic content standards (WIDA, 2020). Examples of each type of key language use in grades 9-12 encompass more action verbs: *interpret, construct, identify, develop, connect, describe, analyze* (WIDA, 2020). WIDA has identified the most prominent key language uses for Standard 5 (Social Studies) to be *explain* and *argue* (WIDA, 2020). These language uses can be directly connected to the benchmarks in Minnesota's high school economics standards, which provides an entry point for integrating content and language instruction.

### ***Connecting Content and Language Development Standards***

The more English learners are exposed to academic language, and the more opportunity they have to practice this academic language, the more this will benefit their language proficiency (Echevarría et al., 2014). The Minnesota Department of Education [MDE] is responsible for overseeing both K-12 Academic Standards and English Language Development Standards, and is "committed to supporting effective implementation of the WIDA ELD Standards" (MDE, 2021b, para. 3). MDE calls for aligning and coordinating K-12 ELD standards implementation work with the implementation of other Minnesota standards, demonstrating its support for integrating language and content instruction in Minnesota's K-12 public schools (MDE 2021b). Recognizing the common language uses, expectations, and functions identified in the content standards and the ELD standards is an entry point for using both sets of standards as guidance for effective instruction for English learners.

### ***Summary of Academic Standards***

English learners must meet the academic standards set forth by the state. These include social studies standards in the discipline of economics, as well as English language development standards. In this section I reviewed and described these standards and noted the opportunities to connect and coordinate these standards. In the next section I review and discuss methods and strategies for teaching content to English learners while attending to their developing English proficiency as well.

### **Content Instruction Models for Secondary EL Students**

While co-teaching or bilingual teaching of content subjects may be an option in some high schools, in most cases, EL students will be learning their content subjects in a mainstream classroom, taught in English by the licensed content teacher (Ballantyne, et al., 2008). Because these mainstream teachers are experts in their content area, but not in language instruction, this is a gap that needs to be filled in order to meet the learning needs of secondary EL students. This section focuses on instructional methods that can be used by the content teacher, including academic language-focused strategies, the principles of sheltered instruction, and collaboration with and support from the licensed EL teacher.

#### ***Academic Language-Focused Strategies***

High school English learners are faced with the need to grow in their academic English proficiency while simultaneously acquiring content area knowledge alongside their native English peers. Public schools have a dual legal obligation to provide both facets of this instruction in a meaningful and accessible manner (USED & USDOJ, 2015). One way to effectively address these dual needs is by treating language and content as inseparable components of instruction, and using methods that foreground the



necessary academic language as a way to construct content knowledge (de Oliveira, 2020). The language-based approach to content instruction does not simplify language as a way to make it accessible for EL students; instead, it centers academic language as the medium for teaching and learning, with an explicit and intentional focus on bridging everyday and academic language (de Oliveira et al., 2019).

All content areas have academic vocabulary, language features and structures that are specific to that subject. The language of science texts relies heavily on passive construction, technical terms, and nominalizations, while mathematics is rife with task-based functional words that may be familiar, but hold math-specific meanings, like *find*, *determine*, *evaluate*, and *show* (Schleppegrell, 2004). Social studies may be the most linguistically challenging content area for English learners due to the high level of word, phrase, syntax and discourse complexity in social studies texts (Zhang, 2017). In addition to using common strategies like pre-teaching key vocabulary, a language-focused approach means intentionally teaching EL students to recognize and analyze the long noun phrases, nominalizations, and various clauses that are used to convey a large amount of information with a densely packed sentence (Zhang, 2017). Language-focused activities use content-rich text as a tool for students to gain understanding of the content topic through a language lesson, whether identifying and defining nominalizations, deconstructing noun phrases, or using transition phrases, pronouns and referents to put a reading passage in the correct order (Gibbons, 2009; Zhang, 2017).

There are endless activities that can be designed to use content material as a vehicle for academic language learning, including dictogloss (a structured group dictation exercise that incorporates listening, speaking, and writing); shared writing (a group "write

aloud" with the teacher acting as scribe); and philosophical chairs (a discussion activity that encourages close listening and critical thinking), to name just a few (Gibbons, 2009). A language-based approach to content teaching can use many methods familiar to the content teacher. The key is to recognize and understand the academic language demands of the content discipline and then be ready to intentionally teach those specific conventions, functions, and structures (Gibbons, 2009).

De Oliveira (2020) describes the language-based approach to content instruction as a framework for providing English learners access to the language of the content area through explicit instruction in the necessary academic language, and emphasizes that the language is not simplified (para. 2). Simplified language may be more accessible to an EL student, but would be a lost opportunity to expand the English learner's academic vocabulary at an appropriate level. It is the *explicit instruction* of academic language that makes the input *comprehensible*, which is cited by many second language acquisition theorists and is a key tenet of sheltered instruction (Echevarría et al., 2014; Lavadenz, 2020; Long, 1983).

### ***Principles of Sheltered Instruction***

The steady increase in the number of English learners entering U.S. schools throughout the 1970s and 1980s led to a transformation in the approaches used to teach them (Markos & Himmel, 2016). English language development strategies shifted from a grammar and translation perspective, to a focus on communication skills, to various efforts to prioritize content learning. By the early 1990s, educators of English learners recognized the need to integrate content and language instruction, and a method now referred to as *sheltered instruction* emerged (Echevarría et al., 2014; Markos & Himmel,

2016; Wright, 2010). Sheltered instruction may be called by other names: CBI (content-based instruction), SDAIE (specially designed academic instruction in English), and SIOP (sheltered instruction observation protocol) (Díaz-Rico, 2013). While these models all share important principles, one key difference is that CBI relies on the EL teacher, who provides language instruction through appropriate and relevant content learning objectives (Díaz-Rico, 2013). In most cases, sheltered instruction refers to teaching content and language together in the mainstream classroom, using a series of intentional instructional practices:

- identifying both content and language objectives
- making the content comprehensible
- building background and connecting to prior knowledge
- using interaction and cooperative learning
- providing opportunities for practice and application
- reviewing, assessing, and providing feedback (Echevarría et al., 2014; Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos & Himmel, 2016; Wright, 2010)

Each of these components of sheltered instruction have many specific elements and strategies that may be employed. Most mainstream teachers will be familiar with many of these elements and strategies; however, principles of sheltered instruction are not simply good teaching habits. Effective instruction of English learners requires teachers to have an understanding of second language acquisition, and to be able to adjust and adapt their lesson preparation and delivery in response to the needs of the EL students in their classes (Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos & Himmel, 2016). Not every element of sheltered instruction must be included in every day's lesson, but the principles and

strategies serve as a guide for what must be considered and included over the course of a multi-day lesson or unit (Echevarría et al., 2014). While there is flexibility in following a sheltered instruction model, it is critical that the guiding focus is on developing language proficiency through each content lesson (Kareva & Echevarría, 2013).

**Content and Language Objectives.** Most content-area teachers are familiar with content standards, and already organize their lessons around content learning objectives. However, teaching English learners requires an additional consideration while planning effective lessons. The first step in preparing for meaningful sheltered instruction is to examine the content objective to identify the relevant academic language. This includes not only key vocabulary terms, but language functions, structures, and skills that are essential for full understanding and participation in the content learning (Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos & Himmel, 2016).

**Comprehensible Input.** During this lesson preparation, the teacher should also identify and prepare supplementary materials to ensure English learners at varying levels of English proficiency can access the lesson content. These may include: word and phrase walls; concept maps with visual cues; audio options for listening while reading; illustrations, charts, and maps; adapted texts; and opportunities for translating materials into the first languages of the students (Díaz-Rico, 2013). These supplemental materials contribute to the second instructional practice in the list summarized earlier: comprehensible input. This tenet of second language acquisition requires adapted or supplementary materials, as well as adjustments in the way the teacher delivers instruction and interacts with the students (Díaz-Rico, 2013; Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Wright, 2010). An effective teacher must intentionally make regular modifications based

on students' English proficiency by slowing the pace of speaking, repeating and rephrasing, using pauses effectively, avoiding idioms, and using clear explanations for all academic tasks (Echevarría et al., 2014).

**Building Background and Connecting to Prior Knowledge.** Building background and connecting to prior knowledge is another good teaching practice with which most content teachers will be familiar, but with sheltered instruction, special attention must be given to the needs and experiences of English learners. A learner's *schemata*, or categories of understanding and knowledge, provide necessary connections for developing new learning and understanding (McVee, et al., 2005). Depending on their individual circumstances, English learners may bring vastly different schemata to the classroom than their non-EL peers. Teachers may use a variety of methods to elicit EL students' prior knowledge, and through discussion, interaction, and explicit instruction, connect new content learning to prior knowledge (Díaz-Rico, 2013; Echevarría et al., 2014). Vocabulary is an important subset of prior knowledge and must be strategically pretaught. Content-specific or technical vocabulary (sometimes called Tier 3 words) and general academic vocabulary (sometimes called Tier 2 words) are essential for building learners' schemata. A sheltered instruction classroom is a vocabulary-rich environment, where key terms are explicitly taught, repeated, and used frequently in context (Díaz-Rico, 2013; Sibold, 2011).

**Interaction and Cooperative Learning.** A sheltered instruction environment provides daily opportunities for student-to-student interaction and cooperative learning, and effective teacher-student talk (Echevarría et al., 2014). Too often, teacher talk dominates content classrooms and English learners are denied the opportunity to practice

using new language structures and academic vocabulary, thus losing the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the language and material. Student interaction also promotes oral literacy, and allows EL students to verify or clarify their comprehension through conversation and collaborative dialogue (Díaz-Rico, 2013; Echevarría et al., 2014; Swain, 2000).

**Practice and Application.** Teacher-student talk can also provide opportunities for English learners to practice and apply the new learning. Teachers can extend oral exchanges with students by allowing extended processing time (often called wait time). Wait time varies by culture, and many teachers in the United States are uncomfortable with the silence that follows their questions; however, this processing and formulation time is essential for English learners to practice and apply their learning (Echevarría et al., 2014). Other important teacher strategies that support practice and application are restating or elaborating on student responses, encouraging other students to contribute to the exchange, and listening for unexpected answers that can provide insight into the student's own prior knowledge (Echevarría et al., 2014; Gibbons, 2009).

**Assessment and Feedback.** Assessment in the sheltered instruction classroom is an ongoing process. Teachers make frequent comprehension checks during instruction to adapt, modify, and reinforce as needed. This regular formative assessment helps determine the level and type of language supports and strategies necessary for student comprehension. Summative assessments require a thorough review of key content concepts and vocabulary to ensure that English learners have had sufficient practice and application to gain understanding of the content, as well as readiness to use the related academic language (Echevarría et al., 2014; Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos &

Himmel, 2016). It is important to understand that most standardized content tests are not generally valid measures of English learners' content knowledge. Complex linguistic structures, insufficient time, and cultural references can all negatively impact an EL student's performance on a standardized content assessment (Markos & Himmel, 2016; Wright, 2010). It is imperative that content teachers use regular informal assessment to guide instruction, and integrate a comprehensive review into the formal assessment process (Echevarría et al., 2014).

### ***EL Teacher Collaboration and Support***

When content teachers have not had training in sheltered instruction or other language-focused content teaching for English learners, their best resource is a licensed EL teacher in their building (Staehr Fenner, 2014). Effective instruction for English learners requires integration of content and language, which leads naturally to a close collaboration between the content teacher and the language teacher. Just as content teachers are the experts in their fields, EL teachers have specialized training and knowledge in second language acquisition (WIDA, 2020). Educators are learners as well as teachers, and can be expected to collaborate and learn from one another. Experienced EL teachers can provide content teachers with additional information and insight about the EL students in their content classroom, including examples of differentiated assignments and activities that are based on the student's developing language proficiency. EL teachers can bring the principles of sheltered instruction to the content classroom, whether as a full partner in a co-teaching arrangement, or through dedicated co-planning time that the EL teacher and content teacher use to ensure comprehensible

input and appropriate language supports for instruction, activities, and assessments (Platt & Wolfe, 2015).

As Platt and Wolfe (2015) have described, while the primary role of EL teachers is to help EL students learn English, in practice, most EL teachers fill multiple roles: providing English language development instruction, supporting meaningful access to grade-level content classes, and serving as advocates and experts who are a resource to students, their families, and staff. Content teachers and EL teachers share responsibility for the education of English learners; it is only natural that they should collaborate to ensure the academic success of EL students (Staehr Fenner, 2014).

### **Summary**

Chapter Two presented a review of the literature in four key areas that have an impact on my research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?* The four key areas were: theories of second language acquisition, common barriers to learning for secondary EL students, the academic standards that apply to secondary EL students, and effective content instruction models for English learners. A synthesis of the literature in these four areas points to some key findings that shaped the direction of my project. Cognitive and sociocultural theories of second language acquisition provided a theoretical basis, and a solution to meeting academic standards while overcoming barriers can be found in the principles of sheltered instruction. I used these findings to develop a curriculum plan for a high school economics course that effectively integrates language and content instruction for English



learners. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used to develop the project, the context and rationale for the project, and includes a detailed description of the project itself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

I began my teaching career nearly six years ago with training, knowledge, and enthusiasm. I was well prepared through my licensure program, but I also knew that my learning would be a never-ending process. Professional development opportunities, workshops, and experienced colleagues have all contributed to my growth as a teacher. As a natural part of my growth, I have taken on the three significant roles of an EL teacher: providing English language development instruction, supporting meaningful access to grade-level content classes, and serving as an advocate and expert to others (Platt & Wolfe, 2015). It is through the lens of the latter two roles that I sought to answer my research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?*

In this chapter, I explain the rationale for the project that I developed in response to this research question, and describe the theoretical framework that supported the project design. I provide a detailed explanation of the project itself. The setting and audience for this project is discussed, as well as the timeline of the project's development and implementation. I also describe how I will assess the effectiveness of the new curriculum.

### Project Rationale and Description

Minnesota's population of English learner (EL) students has been increasing at a faster rate than the general student population (MDE, 2017, p. 12). At my large suburban high school, our EL population has nearly quadrupled in the last five years (MDE,

2021e). As described in Chapter One, in order to effectively provide content instruction and English language development to secondary EL students, content area teachers must be language teachers as well, with academic language learning embedded into core curricular instruction. Chapter Two found that features of a sheltered instruction model will validate, engage, and benefit the diverse range of English learners (Echevarría et al., 2014, pp. 19-20). These features include building background through explicit links to students' experiences; sufficient wait-time and appropriate pacing; a comprehensive review of key vocabulary and concepts; frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion; and opportunities for students to apply their learning in both language and content knowledge, using all language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Echevarría et al., 2014).

While secondary EL students face barriers to learning across all content areas, social studies courses are especially linguistically complex (Zhang, 2017). In my experience, economics has been a particularly challenging course for EL students. As a class that is both required for graduation, and typically taken during the final year of high school, finding ways to make it more meaningful and accessible to English learners was of particular urgency and interest to me.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This curriculum project is anchored in an interconnected set of theories and guidelines that were researched and reviewed in Chapter Two. It is grounded in the cognitive and sociocultural theories of second language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), and is guided by two frameworks: Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) and the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model

(Echevarría et al., 2014). Some key features of the cognitive and sociocultural theories of second language acquisition are included in the eight main components of SIOP, including comprehensible input, interaction, and practice and application (Echevarría et al., 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This integration provided a sound basis for planning lessons that effectively integrate language and content instruction for English learners.

**Understanding by Design.** Understanding by Design (UbD) is a curriculum-planning framework that assists in developing a student-learning focused unit plan, starting with the established standards (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The six facets of understanding are defined as the capacity to *explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, and self-assess* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). These facets of understanding are connected to the academic standards benchmarks in the economics discipline (e.g., *apply, establish, evaluate, explain, identify, define, describe, analyze, measure, compare and contrast*), as described in Chapter Two (MDE, 2013). Similarly, connections are made between the UbD facets of understanding and the ways students engage in the key language uses (e.g., *evaluate, construct, identify, develop, connect, describe, analyze*) described in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework (WIDA, 2020).

**Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol.** The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model provides a comprehensive, detailed, and research-based model for planning and implementing effective sheltered instruction (Echevarría et al., 2014). This model provides the roadmap for integrating content coursework and academic English development in a standards-based curriculum. The SIOP model draws together many of the findings from Chapter Two, such as cooperative

learning, culturally responsive activities, comprehensible input strategies, and grouping students intentionally and appropriately, and incorporates them into a lesson planning and delivery methodology that will benefit all students (Echevarría et al., 2014).

### ***Project Description***

My final project is a Sheltered Economics Course Plan, with a scope and sequence of five units for a semester-long economics course, and detailed sample lesson plans to launch each of the five units. Each unit overview includes academic content benchmarks and English language development expectations, which provide the basis for lesson-level content and language objectives. Essential questions, desired understandings, and key knowledge and skills are provided for each unit.

I developed my project materials by drawing on multiple sources. The literature review in Chapter 2, as well as my original project plans, referenced the 2011 social studies standards, which were (and still are) the version currently in use. However, because the Minnesota Department of Education has now begun the statutory rulemaking process on the third draft of the newly revised social studies standards (SSS3), and they are highly likely to be implemented as written (MDE, 2021g), I chose to use this newer version for my project. I referenced two existing high school economics curricula as a starting point for organizing the economics benchmarks of the SSS3 into units for my new course. I then consulted the WIDA ELD Standards Framework (WIDA, 2020) to connect appropriate key language uses, language expectations, and language functions to each economics benchmark.

With the new economics benchmarks grouped into five units, and language expectations associated with each benchmark, I used the UbD and SIOP frameworks to

build out my project. In the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, language expectations are roughly analogous to content standards, and provide a basis for the language objectives that can be identified for a unit's lessons. Language expectations have reference codes that identify the ELD Standard (academic content area), the grade-level cluster, the key language use, and the communication mode (interpretive or expressive). Multiple language expectations could be associated with each benchmark, so I chose to highlight just one or two as a representative example for each content benchmark.

After all five units were outlined, I used a SIOP lesson template to create a detailed lesson plan that could be used to launch each new unit. The five lesson plans all include key features of sheltered instruction, with an emphasis on developing academic vocabulary, using multimodal techniques that support comprehension, grouping students intentionally for interaction, and reviewing key vocabulary and content concepts at the end of each lesson. Selected materials were created for each lesson, with an emphasis on the key terms word study and formative assessments for various English proficiency levels. Rather than creating specific summative assessments for each unit, I wrote a narrative that provides a series of example summative assessments for this sheltered economics course, and also describes an overarching philosophy of assessments in the sheltered classroom.

### **Setting and Audience**

The setting for this curriculum project is a semester-long economics class at my large suburban high school. English learners in my own school were the inspiration for my research question, *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their*

*academic English proficiency?* The audience for this project is mainstream content teachers and administrators in my school, and potentially in other high schools with similar demographics and characteristics.

All high school students in Minnesota are required to pass a class that meets the social studies standards for the discipline of economics. At my school, this class is only offered in 12th grade. The EL population in this school has been increasing, but remains below 2.5% of the total school population (MDE, 2021e). The EL population is not large enough to offer an EL-only sheltered instruction economics class; therefore the specific setting for this curriculum project is a general economics class of 12th grade students that is made up of both English learners and non-EL students.

Secondary English learners are the intended beneficiaries of this curriculum project, but the audience for this entire work consists of both mainstream teachers and administrators. Successful implementation of a new curriculum plan requires support from the teacher who will be using it. A school administrator's support may be necessary for approving a curriculum change. When a content teacher has been teaching a specific course for some length of time, a significant change to either the curriculum or the teaching methods may be resisted or questioned. For these reasons, a research-based plan that is grounded in accepted theories is the best case for pursuing a change. While this curriculum project is narrowly focused on an economics course, the principles and theories that ground the project may be the basis for creating sheltered instruction curriculum plans for other content courses. It is my hope that a successful implementation of this project's work may be the catalyst for wider interest in sheltered instruction by

mainstream teachers and administrators at my school, and perhaps at other high schools with similar demographics.

### **Timeline**

While I had hoped to develop this project over the course of a full calendar year, the reality of teaching during another pandemic-disrupted year prevented me from doing the preliminary research and planning that I had intended to start during the 2021-22 school year. Instead, the project was developed over the course of the summer of 2022. I anticipate sharing the results of this work with fellow teachers and administrators in my school during the 2022-23 school year, as we continue to improve services for our growing EL student population.

Over the last six years I have had many conversations with administrators, mainstream content teachers, and instructional coaches in my building about improving and strengthening our school's EL programming. I have also collaborated with our instructional coach and an EL teacher colleague to create and lead two different professional development workshops in our building on effectively teaching English learners in mainstream classes. Looking ahead, I anticipate having more of these discussions, and potentially more opportunities to engage with more mainstream content teachers in trying proven strategies for effective instruction of both language and content for English learners in their classes. Changing curriculum and methods can take time, so I will focus in the coming school year on sharing the results of this research and my project with as many others in my building as I can, with a goal of building interest and support for offering a sheltered economics course the following year.

### **Assessment**



The effectiveness of my sheltered instruction economics curriculum plan will be measured qualitatively. There is no way to reasonably compare the academic outcomes (i.e., grades) of EL students who take the current, non-sheltered instruction course with the outcomes of students who take a course using the new sheltered instruction design, because there are too many variables that inhibit year-to-year comparison of cohorts of 12th grade EL students. Instead, I anticipate gathering data that measures student attitudes and expectations about the economics class before, during, and after taking the sheltered class. A survey will be developed in cooperation with the mainstream teacher who agrees to teach the sheltered course, to bring together the perspectives of both the experienced content teacher and the experienced EL teacher. This will be an important tool that will provide both teachers the opportunity to collaborate to further modify and improve the course.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I presented a rationale for the curriculum project I created. I explained the theoretical framework that guided the development of my project: Understanding by Design and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol. I provided a detailed description of the project itself, as well as the setting and audience for the project. I explained the timeline for the development and implementation of the project. I also described the method for assessing the effectiveness of the project in addressing my research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?* In Chapter Four I reflect on the completed project,

including the research and development process, the implications and limitations of the project, and any next steps or additional related work to be considered.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Throughout each of the six years that I have taught English learners at my suburban high school, our EL population has steadily increased and our program has been challenged to respond and adapt to this rapid growth. Witnessing the struggles of some of my students to learn content while acquiring academic English in their mainstream classes inspired my research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?*

In this chapter, I reflect on what I have learned through the research, writing, and development of this work. I revisit the literature review to highlight some of the key findings that influenced my project. I describe some of the potential implications of this work, as well as some limitations. Next steps are outlined, which include sharing the results of my project and ideas for potential future work. Finally, I discuss the benefits of this work to the teaching profession.

### Key Learnings

This capstone project is the culmination of two consecutive summers of dedicated work, encompassing the development of my research question, a review of an ever-growing body of literature, and countless hours of synthesizing, writing, re-reading, and revising. While I always encourage my students (and my own children) to think of themselves as "life-long learners" and I embrace this label myself, it was a humbling and valuable experience to work through this capstone endeavor. As a learner in this process, I frequently identified with the mindset of a student who is stumbling towards knowledge

that they don't quite understand yet. It felt confusing and frustrating at times, but ultimately I could almost feel the new connections being formed in my brain as I cast a wide net for pertinent literature, seeking to understand and categorize it for relevance and importance to my research question.

As a researcher, writer, and learner, this capstone process gave me valuable first hand experience with two principles I hold: curiosity and an openness to new ideas will help expand one's understanding of even familiar subjects, and detailed timelines are essential to completing large or complex projects. While neither of these learnings were especially unexpected, going through these experiences myself over the last two summers helped deepen my belief in the importance of these tenets. This is something I will draw on when teaching in the coming years. When I talk about these concepts with students, I will be able to identify with them as a fellow student, and not only bring a teacher's point of view.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

My literature review was organized into four research categories or topics: theories of second language acquisition, common barriers to learning for secondary EL students, the academic standards that apply to secondary EL students, and effective content instruction models for English learners. Each of these topics contained findings that were influential in the development of my project. Some of the most important findings connected to one another, tying together certain second language acquisition (SLA) theories with one of the effective models of instruction for EL students, known as sheltered instruction. The cognitive and sociocultural perspectives on SLA both involve interaction, comprehensible input, and comprehensible output (Gass, 2003; Krashen,

1982; Long, 1983; Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 2000). This ties directly to three of the key components of the sheltered instruction model: making the content comprehensible; using interaction and cooperative learning; and providing opportunities for practice and application (Echevarría et al., 2014; Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Markos & Himmel, 2016; Wright, 2010).

Another important finding was the pair of studies conducted ten years apart that indicated that a majority of mainstream teachers believe, incorrectly, that English learners should be able to acquire English within two years of enrolling in school in the United States (Mitchell, 2016; Reeves, 2006). This misperception, combined with the fact that it can take five to seven years, or more, to acquire a level of academic English proficiency that will allow full engagement in content coursework at the same level as non-EL peers (Cummins, 2016; Díaz-Rico, 2013; Wright, 2010), is evidence of the need for intentional academic language instruction, designed for English learners, to be integrated into mainstream courses.

The *WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition: Kindergarten–Grade 12* (WIDA, 2020) and *Making Content Comprehensible for Secondary English Learners: The SIOP Model* (Echevarría et al., 2014) are two sources that were particularly useful in developing my curriculum project. The WIDA publication is an essential guide that summarizes and describes language expectations for EL students at various grades and proficiency levels, and includes detailed resources for integrating language and content in practice (WIDA, 2020). The SIOP text is a valuable source for both lesson planning and teaching using principles of sheltered instruction.

### **Implications and Limitations**

A major policy implication of this work is that more resources are needed if all English learners are to have access to mainstream classes that integrate content and language learning in a meaningful way. Developing a semester-long course outline with content benchmarks and language expectations, along with a set of detailed sample lessons based on content and language objectives, was not a quick or easy task. The impact of this project will only be realized and, ideally, multiplied, through the involvement of more teachers, and a supportive administration that is committed to the sheltered instruction model. It is my hope this sheltered economics curriculum project will help pave the way toward this greater engagement and support.

The limitations of this project are in the same vein. Due to time and content knowledge constraints, I was not able to create a complete set of lessons for the entire semester-long sheltered economics curriculum. Ideally, this type of curriculum would be co-created by an EL teacher and a mainstream teacher as the content expert. Therefore, my project is a model and a starting point for what is possible to implement, when an EL teacher and a content teacher have time to collaborate and combine their expertise.

### **Future Work**

A logical priority for future work would be to partner with a mainstream economics teacher to build on the course outline and unit launch lessons of my capstone project. This would require a content teacher who is willing and able to take this on, as well as time for the EL teacher to support the content teacher in the transition to planning and delivering their own sheltered instruction. While designed specifically to address the required economics course that all high school students must pass to graduate, the findings of this research and the curriculum project I developed provide a sound basis for

bringing the sheltered instruction model into other content courses as well. I am fortunate to be co-planning and co-teaching a new English Language Arts (ELA) class with an ELA-licensed colleague this coming school year, and I have drawn on this capstone work to incorporate sheltered instruction components into our course development. This new course will provide an immediate opportunity to put the findings of this capstone to the test, and will inform future efforts to bring sheltered instruction principles and planning to additional content areas.

### **Sharing Results**

As previously discussed, implementing a new curriculum plan—particularly one that requires what could be significant changes in teaching methods and practices—can be difficult. This coming school year, I plan to focus on sharing the results of this research and my project with others in my building, specifically our instructional coaches, my administrators, and the content teachers with whom I currently collaborate. Ideally, the sheltered economics curriculum would spark interest and find enough support to be implemented the following year. I anticipate leading an ongoing iteration of communication and advocacy, seeking and finding opportunities in willing and interested content teachers who would like to partner with EL teachers to move toward integrating academic language and content instruction.

### **Benefits to the Profession**

All teachers need to see themselves as language teachers, with content-specific language structures and features that must be explicitly taught (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Echevarría et al., 2014). This sheltered economics curriculum project provides an evidence-based framework for bringing academic language instruction into a mainstream

content course, and while this project focuses specifically on economics, the underlying theories and research findings apply across all subject areas. For teachers who are interested in better serving the English learners in their classes, this capstone paper will help them gain a deeper understanding of these students' needs. The capstone project provides examples for how to put effective strategies into practice using the principles of sheltered instruction. This work also highlights the importance of collaboration between mainstream teachers and their EL teacher colleagues.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reflected on what I learned through the research, writing, and development of this capstone project, as I sought to answer the research question: *How can a high school economics curriculum be designed to help English learners gain a deep understanding of the course topics while improving their academic English proficiency?* I revisited the literature review and discussed some of the key findings that influenced my work. I described some implications and some limitations of this project, and outlined my vision for sharing the results of my project, along with potential future work to be developed. I also discussed the benefits of this work to the teaching profession. As I prepare to begin my seventh year as a teacher of English learners at my suburban high school, this capstone project provides another resource we can use to move toward a more robust and effective EL program.



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