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Supporting Upper Elementary Newcomer Students in the Areas of Speaking and Writing

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Supporting Upper Elementary Newcomer Students in the Areas of Speaking and Writing

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the guiding question for this Capstone Project: *How can teachers best provide writing and speaking opportunities for upper elementary newcomer multilingual students in a content classroom?* It will also provide personal and professional background as to how this research question came into fruition. First, this chapter will look at what brought me into the field of multilingual education and then it will move onto my current teaching placement, including its demographics, educational framework, and issues that have been noticeable through my three years working as an English language (EL) teacher at this location.

This guiding question hopes to address the problem of over-translating in the content classroom, which will be described in more detail later on in this chapter. There is also a rationale for why this capstone project will focus primarily on speaking and writing opportunities as opposed to the other two language domains of listening and reading.

Personal Background

From a young age, I have always been interested in the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world ever since I was fortunate enough to be enrolled in a Spanish Immersion program in Kindergarten. Immersion programs have grown tremendously since then, but enrollment was a lottery system at that time, with siblings of those enrolled getting automatic acceptance. Since my older sibling was accepted, I went to Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion starting in Kindergarten and learned Spanish through this language model. After graduating from high school, I knew that I wanted to pursue a

career that revolved somehow around language, but exactly what that meant I was not sure. It wasn't until the end of university when I was about to graduate with a degree in elementary education and Spanish that I realized my real interest was in teaching English to multilingual students, especially those who came from Latin American countries due to my experience growing up bilingual in English and Spanish.

I soon fell in love with teaching multilingual learners after taking several English learner (EL) substitute teacher positions. That same year I decided to go back to school and get a license in ESL K-12 while living abroad. In 2018 I was offered a Fulbright Scholarship to teach English in Bogota, Colombia at a private university. Here I taught university professors who were pressured to improve their level of English in order to have job security. Many professors expressed concern over improving their proficiency on the A1-C2 scale. The beginner level, A, is considered the most basic level of English while C2 means that the speaker has near native fluency in English. Other professors assisted the classes for the sole purpose of showing their name marked as present on the attendance sheet.

Second semester was a significantly different teaching placement as I went from teaching professors to university freshmen students, though their reasons for coming to class were similar to those of the professors. Some truly enjoyed the class and others saw their language course as a class that only needed to be checked off for graduation. This experience gave me a glimpse into the needs of students who are learning another language, and it gave me practice in making the learning environment engaging and beneficial for everyone no matter their purpose for being there. However, I knew that I

wanted to go back and teach multilingual students in Minnesota, which brought me to my last teaching position.

Context

My first EL position was at a charter school in St. Paul which had been around for over twenty years, beginning as a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school. It later expanded over the last few years to include a middle school, meaning it became Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade relatively quickly. This school has always attracted mostly Latinx families and students. In fact, over 90 percent of students identified as Latinx with Spanish being the predominant language. The other two languages spoken by students were English and Yoruba, though Yoruba accounted for less than one percent of the total student body.

The model at this school, a dual language program, has been to provide bilingual and bicultural education to represent its families and develop literacy skills in both English and Spanish. However, there has been a strong attempt over the last year to bring the school back to its mission of creating true biliteracy and cultural competence through valuing Latinx cultural experiences. With constant turnover in leadership roles and failing test scores, there is a need to bring the school back to its original mission in order to keep the school running. This has led to dramatic restructuring of school curriculum and practices.

Dual language programs can take on several different models. At this school, Pre-Kindergarten through first grade was 90/10 meaning 90 percent of instructional time was spent in Spanish while 10 percent was taught in English. Starting in second grade, it became a 50/50 model and literacy development switched to English. Students learned

how to read in Spanish through first grade and then had to make the switch to English once they were in second grade. Upper elementary was mostly taught in English with one core Spanish class of 60 minutes.

Of the over 500 students enrolled, over 300 were considered EL based on the home language questionnaire given to families upon enrollment. They were also identified as EL after taking the state WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) screener test. This is a test administered at the beginning of the year, or whenever a new student arrives and has any language other than English listed on their enrollment paperwork. It assesses their language skills in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing. At this school, 60 percent of students qualified for EL services. With that being said, the term 'EL' varies when considering language abilities. Some students speak Spanish at home with parents and grandparents but read in Spanish at a kindergarten or first grade level. They have social language skills but lack the academic skills of Spanish. Others grew to read and write fluently in both languages.

The group of students I worked the closest with were new-to-country and they came from El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala. This past year I spent the majority of my time working with nine fourth grade new-to-country (NTC) students as I pushed into their English language arts, science, and small group literacy time. Aside from that push-in model, I had seven of them in a pull-out group to help them develop basic English communication skills. Several of them came to school having a solid foundation in Spanish literacy and moved quickly with reading and writing in English while a few had low literacy skills in Spanish and did not progress nearly as fast as the others. Even though I spent the bulk of the school day working with these students, it still

became evident to me that the students were lacking learning opportunities when an EL teacher was not present in the classroom.

For the over 300 students who qualified for EL services, there were three EL teachers in the building which meant we each had a caseload of over 100 students. Especially since this school had a high number of NTC students, we were stretched thin with how much support we were able to provide. A problem at our school was that classroom teachers, unsure how to support their NTC students who did not participate in class, felt the need to translate all assignments and directions into Spanish. This offered a quick solution to the problem of students not comprehending the content.

Teachers often used Google translate to translate Google slides when both in distance learning as well as in-person learning. Long articles were translated in upper elementary and middle school, as well as directions for writing assignments and projects. This was relatively easy for classroom teachers to do, especially when done on Google Slides, since our NTC population had a home language of only Spanish, and those who speak Yoruba are not NTC. That meant teachers didn't need to think of ways to display various languages for instruction and for assignments.

Teachers had the best interest of their students in mind and were well intentioned, however, they struggled to understand the long term negative effects translating would have on students' growth socially and academically. A language scaffold is meant to be a temporary support to help students engage in content and build connections within the learning process (Gibbons, 2015). However, by translating, we end up making this a long term solution which ultimately prevents our language learners from growing in the target language of English. According to Cummings (1979) it generally can take students six

months to two years to develop their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), otherwise known as social language that is learned in everyday, informal, interactions. On the other hand, it can take students more than five years to develop their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which is a specialized language used in educational contexts (Cummins, 1979). Creating a bridge from informal speaking to sophisticated and academic writing is a process that takes intentional planning on the part of the teacher. Gibbons (2015) introduces the idea of a *mode continuum* where students are engaged in the process of moving from what they can see and experience, to reflecting on these experiences with formal writing which includes academic writing structures and vocabulary. It takes time and intentional practice to build academic language (Gibbons, 2015). Educators are doing a disservice to their students when opportunities to develop academic English language are not provided even to the most beginner language learners.

Speaking and Writing

The four domains of language are listening, speaking, reading, and writing but for this capstone project I purposely chose to focus on two of the four domains of language. Reading and listening are both productive skills while listening and reading are receptive. This capstone project will look at how to incorporate speaking and writing opportunities in the general education classroom since these are productive language skills that are measurable and used for both social and academic purposes. These domains show teachers what students are able to produce which increases teacher motivation when they are able to see growth and it ultimately increases student motivation as well.

In my three years working as an EL teacher, I've noticed that speaking and writing are the two areas where students score the lowest on the WIDA ACCESS test administered each spring. This assessment measures language proficiency on a scale of one to six with one being labeled as 'Entering' and six as 'Reaching' or nearly proficient. In order to exit out of the EL program in Minnesota, a student must have a cumulative score of at least 4.5 and three out of four domains must be above 3.5. Reading and writing are literacy skills and are weighed more heavily when determining the composite score. This means a student may score high on listening, speaking, and reading, but if their writing score was lower, this could strongly impact the composite score and prevent them from exiting the program.

In my work with newcomers, specifically over the last year, I noticed on their preliminary scores that the majority improved drastically in their listening and reading skills. Some moved from a level one in both domains the previous year to jumping two or three levels the following. Their writing and speaking scores didn't increase nearly as much with students stuck at around a level 1.9 in writing and around level 1.7 in speaking. This tells me that while it takes years to become proficient in a language, we can do more to hone in on helping our upper elementary newcomer students find success in speaking and writing.

Conclusion

This chapter started by introducing the guiding question of the capstone project which is: *How can teachers best provide writing and speaking opportunities for upper elementary newcomer multilingual students in a content classroom?* and continued by explaining what brought me to teach multilingual learners after personal experiences

revolving around language and teaching. In my first few years teaching multilingual students I noticed a lack of understanding amongst classroom teachers as to how to best support newcomer students in content classes without relying on direct translations for lessons and assignments. Explanation was also given as to why this capstone project will focus on the domains of speaking and writing and its relation to the WIDA ACCESS proficiency assessment which measures students' growth in English productive and receptive language.

Chapter Two will be a review of the current literature on best supports for newcomers in the general education classroom. It will take research findings and examine what researchers have found to be best practices in relation to this capstone question including past and current trends to support upper elementary students in the general education classroom. Chapter Three is a detailed project description that incorporates the findings in Chapter Two of best practice in English language instruction. The last chapter reflects on the curriculum project and offers possible implications for the project and future areas of research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Before even beginning to consider best practices for developing speaking and writing skills of upper elementary newcomer students, the complex educational system they arrive into needs to be closely examined and critiqued due to the fact that historically, educational practices have not reflected the needs of immigrants (Cummins, 1996; Macedo, 2000). Immigrant students, often referred to as newcomers, if they have been in the country for a short period of time, have been marginalized in schools for speaking languages other than English (Macedo, 2000). Schools began to address the complex needs of students once laws such as *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) were put into place. This case was brought to the supreme court when students of Chinese descent were not given adequate support in English development in the state of California. Supporters of *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) argued that all students must have access to proper language instruction to have equal educational opportunities as their peers (U.S Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Unfortunately it is still evident from research that while educators are beginning to value newcomers and multilingual students, addressing their needs does not have a universal solution across states and school districts (Umansky et al., 2020).

This chapter will start by first looking at how teachers across the country are trained to teach multilingual students in their classrooms. From there it will look at the challenges of implementing English language teaching models in schools while considering teacher training and state mandates. Next, it will look at the World-Class

Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) framework for teaching multilingual students and its influence on teaching language across content curriculum. The following section relates to current research on addressing the oral and writing development of language learners. Lastly, this chapter will look at curriculum best practices for newcomers in content classes.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

As of 2020, 10.1% of the student population in kindergarten through 12th grade are considered English language learners, sometimes referred to as English learner (EL) or multilingual learner (ML) (Harklau & Ford, 2021). These terms will be used interchangeably throughout this literature review. The term ‘EL’ is also not a one-size-fits-all definition for this particular group of students. Within the definition of EL, more than three fourths are born in the United States but speak at least one other language at home aside from English, while the remaining are born abroad and either recently immigrated or have been in the country for many years (Harklau & Ford, 2021). Of those who were born abroad, some are students with limited or interrupted formal education, or SLIFE, while others have had schooling in their home country and have literacy skills in their home language (Umansky, 2020).

The population of immigrants fluctuates with changes in federal immigration policies and we still see that the majority of EL students are clustered in California, Texas, and more urban areas (Harklau & Ford, 2021). However, there are areas of the country that are seeing a growth in the number of ML students in their school districts that have had little to no multilingual learners previously (Hiatt & Fairbairn, 2018).

With the wide range of needs and experiences within the EL population, we also see there are wide inconsistencies on how to best address the needs of EL students across states, since federal laws ultimately leave important educational implementation decisions up to states and school districts. For example, federal mandates have broad expectations for addressing the needs of multilingual learners that generally say that states are required to help ELs overcome language barriers. They must provide students with equal access to core curriculum, and public schools must identify and test English language learners annually to track language proficiency and growth (Harklau & Ford, 2021). The ways individual states and school districts go about addressing these expectations are inconsistent and depend on a variety of factors including administrators' beliefs on best practices, availability of resources, and school demographics.

There are no specific federal laws that regulate instructional minutes designated for English language development or requirements for students to be seen by licensed English teaching professionals (Baecher & Bell, 2017). However, Hiatt & Fairbairn (2018) address three key factors that show a desperate need for more teacher training and professional development around EL education regardless of what the instructional model at any given school may look like. The first factor is the reality that school demographics are changing and, as stated earlier, the number of students who speak more than one language at home is rising. The second factor is the large achievement gap between non-EL and EL students. EL students consistently score lower on standardized tests in math and language arts than their peers. Penner-Williams et al. (2017) highlights this by addressing the fact that in the 2011-2012 school year only 35% and 45% of multilingual students met proficiency in language arts and mathematics state testing. Thirdly, teachers

who are currently in the field report that they feel unprepared to meet the needs of their students due to a lack of training and a lack of available resources (Hinojosa, 2022).

Qualified and well trained teachers ultimately lead to higher student achievement (Hiatt & FairBairn, 2018). The question is how should teachers be trained in EL best practices while taking into account evolving federal and state mandates related to EL education? The remainder of this section will look at different state responses and models to teacher training and its connection to the research question of how to develop productive language in upper elementary newcomer students.

State Responses

Well trained teachers come from universities that have well established and holistic approaches to teacher preparation. An emerging theme from literature surrounding teacher preparation related to EL learners is how universities have responded to state mandates for teacher training. Roy-Campbell (2013) summarizes different requirements for addressing EL needs by state and says that there are only four states total that have explicit certification requirements for all in-service teachers; while 70% of states require some form of teacher preparation, though the extent and quality of the training is more loosely defined. For example, there are 17 states in the country “where teacher certification standards for all teachers contain reference to the special needs of ELLs” (Roy-Campbell, 2013, p. 260). This ambiguous language leaves universities to grapple with how to prepare all classroom teachers to effectively work with students in their classrooms.

In the state of Florida, all pre-service teachers, meaning those currently enrolled in an educational program in college, are required to have an EL endorsement to work in

its public schools. This translates to universities providing two stand-alone courses for English language development in addition to English language best practices infused across the university curriculum to fulfill this licensing requirement. The teacher education faculty in turn must complete 45 hours of professional development in order to effectively incorporate English language best practices into these infused courses (de Jong et al., 2018).

The state of Massachusetts shows another example of universities attempting to prepare in-service teachers with the skills necessary to work with multilingual students in the field while also juggling state mandates. Due to a voter referendum in 2002, Massachusetts moved to a Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) model, meaning that all classroom teachers needed to be trained in SEI to work with EL students in their English dominant classes. Schall-Leckrone et al. (2018) took a close look at an SEI mandated course created by university faculty. After two years of implementing the SEI course and making modifications based on teaching faculty feedback, teachers enrolled in the course felt more confident in writing content and language objectives. But, they still wanted more hands-on learning that couldn't be fit in a four credit course.

Florida universities were tasked with building infused curriculum allowing all pre-service teachers to be EL endorsed and Massachusetts had to prepare mainstream teachers to teach multilingual students by providing college-level SEI courses. Based on these two examples it is clear that state mandates to address the needs of a growing EL population often lead to tacked on courses or professional development to check off that state requirements were met. While it shouldn't be denied that these responses from

universities were with positive intent, the reality is that such responses are not enough to meet the needs of students (Schall-Leckrone, 2018).

The SEI courses developers in Massachusetts wrestled with the fact that a four credit course was not enough to fit in all that is needed to successfully teach English language learners. Some faculty in Florida tasked with implementing EL practices across teacher education curriculum saw the 45 hour professional development requirement as “an external requirement to be fulfilled rather than a genuine opportunity for professional growth” (de Jong, 2018, p. 179). On top of that, there was no evidence that this professional development translated to faculty making substantial changes to their course syllabi (de Jong et al., 2018). Pre-service teachers are going into classrooms with a superficial understanding of what is needed to educate the growing population of multilingual learners.

A single university course or even several university courses are not enough to support teachers and students if there is no space for in-field practice or opportunity for reflection and progress monitoring. Because educators have insufficient training and are faced with a variety of needs each year with little time to plan and collaborate with colleagues, there is a need for a designated curriculum to support beginning English language learners that reflects current school curriculum and state standards. What’s more, when university professors themselves do not have the background knowledge, the teaching experience, or the training in working with multilingual students, it is simply not possible to teach future teachers well in this area. One cannot teach what one does not know (de Jong et al., 2018).

Just like Massachusetts and Florida, the state of Minnesota has its own plan in place to provide equitable education to multilingual students based on the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. This law was signed by former president Barack Obama and is an updated version of the No Child Left Behind law that was previously the driver for school accountability. The ESSA now requires that all students be taught rigorous academic content to prepare them for college and it also specifies that states must have specific entry and exit criteria for English learners (U.S. Department of Education, n.d).

In response to ESSA, Minnesota state statute 124D.61 requires all public schools to follow certain requirements pertaining to the education of multilingual students (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2021). One of these requirements is that school districts must have a written plan in place that describes the programming offered to multilingual students based on their English proficiency levels. This plan must be accessible to families upon request. Teachers need to be provided with professional development opportunities based on serving language learners in schools which can include professional development in the areas of methodology, curriculum building, or administering language assessments. This is one other requirement that Minnesota must meet to be in compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2021).

While this was a look into three specific state responses, the challenges of working with state mandates to train pre-service and in-service teachers can be felt across the country and are not limited to these specific circumstances. With interpretations of mandates related to ML education being left up to states and school districts, there needs to be more research done related to pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher

professional development and the extent these trainings have on the educational success of multilingual learners (Molle, 2013). This theme of tacking on EL best practices and attempting to do justice with limited resources and guidance is a trend across the board within the field of English language education and will come up in the following subtopics of current curriculum and EL teaching models.

English Language Teaching Models

It is widely agreed that English language learners need language support in kindergarten through high school regardless of whether they are arriving from another country or if they were born in the United States (Short et. al., 2018). The Lau v. Nichols' court case of 1974 confirmed that schools must take necessary steps to ensure EL students receive quality education that addresses their need to learn English alongside grade level curriculum (Umansky et al., 2020). Another factor that influences state's interests in increasing English proficiency is the incentive of state testing. Multilingual students continue to score significantly lower on standardized tests than their English proficient peers and with states that have high numbers of EL students, tackling the language gap could ultimately better school statistics when looking at academic achievement (Penner-Williams et. al., 2017).

As seen in the previous section, states have mandates related to EL education, though these are not always set in stone and can evolve over time. This leads to schools and universities having to find ways to work with such mandates by adding teacher training for in-service and pre-service teachers and adapt university teacher education curriculum to include best practices for English language development in core subjects. These attempts can come across as a one-and-done mentality when addressing the needs

of 10% of the school population is left to single college courses or a set number of professional development hours that are checked off and forgotten. This scramble to include EL students is not limited to teacher training but is also seen in the in-school teaching models and trends throughout the country (Whiting, 2017; Baecher & Bell, 2017).

One model of teaching is known as the pull-out model where a designated EL teacher takes one student or a small group of students out of the general classroom and delivers instruction in a separate classroom. The content of pull-out is generally unrelated to the content of the classroom as it tends to focus more on basic language skills in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Another is referred to as a push-in model. In this situation an EL teacher is in the general classroom and works with EL students either in collaboration with the classroom teacher or separately (Baecher & Bell, 2017). Lastly, co-teaching is another model where an EL teacher works in the same physical space with the mainstream teacher and works closely to plan and teach using content curriculum (Umansky et al., 2020). Though push-in and co-teaching often are viewed differently, in the article by Whiting (2017) these terms are used interchangeably.

Benefits of Co-teaching Models

Recently there has been a push to have English language learners in the mainstream classroom and avoid removing them from the core content classes (Whiting, 2017). In theory it sounds like an ideal practice. Multilingual students get to remain with their peers and avoid stigmatization by being removed from class to work on skills that other students do not need. This physical and social exclusion can be especially damaging for students in middle school who are in the search for social approval amongst their

peers. Umansky et al. (2020) point out another reason why there is a trend for the push-in model. In this study, school district leaders made the case for push-in models so that newcomer students received instruction that uses high quality resources and from classroom teachers who are well-versed in the given core subjects. One director who was interviewed in the study also said “Folks in other places say ‘Oh, in my district, the newcomers, they just send them off to the ESL [ELD] teacher and forget about them.’ Well, you can’t do that here because they are in your classes,”(p. 46) so all teachers are responsible for working with ML students. Ideally, when newcomer EL students are in the mainstream for the entirety of the school day, all teachers, not just EL teachers, hold responsibility for educating multilingual learners and it does not fall solely on those with specific English language teaching credentials.

Challenges of Co-Teaching

As with teacher training and professional development, we can see that theory does not always translate into practice. While the school director referenced in the previous paragraph stated that all educational staff need to take on the demands of teaching language and content, Whiting (2017) surveyed EL teachers and found that many were in positions that left them as not much more than paraprofessionals. They would assist in classroom duties unrelated to their positions or they were not able to use their knowledge of English language development. In an effective co-teaching model, both teachers plan lessons together that incorporate language support which comes from the qualified EL teacher and content expertise that comes from the mainstream content teacher. Both educators are seen as equals. Whiting (2017) also found that when EL teachers have less power in the classroom, students sense this power struggle.

Multilingual students in middle school feel embarrassed when another teacher is by their side to help support when other students do not need this one-on-one attention.

Aside from EL teachers themselves losing a personal sense of autonomy, multilingual students are those that feel the repercussions of this power imbalance. When EL teachers are left out of the planning process, they are not able to incorporate language strategies or support into the classroom lessons and materials. This leaves them with having to continuously teach on-the-fly without time to process how to target the specific needs of their EL students or find appropriate materials as differentiation (Whiting, 2017). This is to say that while a content expert and language expert may both be physically in the classroom, multilingual students end up with little support and may end up as what is called long-term ELs (Baecher & Bell, 2017). They are not able to reach English proficiency even after being immersed in the language for years.

A theme within the literature related to models of EL instruction is a lack of quality instruction which leads to students not getting the learning they deserve (Baecher & Bell, 2017). Students need targeted English language development to work on building their productive domains of speaking and writing which EL teachers say they lack when there is little communication with mainstream teachers when pushing into classrooms (Umansky, 2020).

Umansky (2020) and Baecher (2017) both found that the chosen model is actually less important in determining the success of EL instruction. What is more important is the quality of instruction and effective collaboration among teachers. The problem, however, is how to create environments that foster this mentality when classroom teachers and EL teachers are constantly stretched thin. In many schools there are not enough highly

qualified language teachers to address the needs of all of the students. Even when collaboration is a school-wide practice, this sometimes leads to language teachers being overwhelmed as they have to collaborate with many teachers across varying grade levels. The quality of this collaboration is weakened since “collaboration with ‘everybody’ becomes collaboration with nobody” (Baecher & Bell, 2017, p. 59). More cannot be done with less resources, at least not effectively.

A lack of time is another barrier preventing EL teachers from collaborating and from providing high-quality instruction regardless of the teaching model. In the study done by Baecher & Bell (2017), push-in and pull-out EL teachers who taught kindergarten through 5th grade and came from various schools were asked to log the total number of minutes they worked with their EL students over the span of a month. It was found that the students ended up receiving instruction from their EL teacher only 50% of the allotted time. This was due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, teachers needing to administer state standardized tests, field trips, conferences, and EL teachers being assigned as substitute teachers for the day. With constant interruptions it is less likely to see significant language growth year to year and this leads to long-term English language students.

A curriculum that is based on grade level content standards and one that incorporates English language development in the areas of writing and speaking would help alleviate the stress of limited planning time. In fact, in the survey done by Whiting (2017), it was found that a positive feature of push-in instruction was that EL teachers had the opportunity to see first hand what goes on in the classroom from instructional practices to curriculum. Working in the classroom allows EL teachers to have a better

understanding of grade-level content. They can infuse grade level content and standards with their own targeted language instruction.

In conclusion, EL educators need some authority over curriculum and instruction to target the specific language needs of their multilingual learners regardless of the instructional model decided on by administrators and other school stakeholders. English language teachers are stretched thin as they are asked to develop curriculum targeting the four domains of language while simultaneously working as instructional coaches, test administrators, and building substitutes. All methods of instruction can be beneficial if teachers are provided a base that includes state content standards as well as English proficiency standards.

WIDA Consortium and Language Standards

As with teacher training and professional development for meeting the needs of ML students, there have been several substantial federal policies that have altered the educational landscape in order to provide equitable learning for all students that is measurable and consistent. Multilingual students continue to underperform on state testing in the areas of language arts, math, and science, which tells us that there is a need for applicable language standards that fit the current content area standards that are assessed each year (Maxwell, 2012). This section will take a closer look at such policies and how it has shaped the field of English language education which is constantly evolving in tandem with general education.

Policies and Accountability

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) was created for the purpose of maintaining consistency among states and to ensure students were given access to rigorous instruction

to compete with a global society (Morita-Mullaney, 2017). One of the expectations laid out in NCLB was that states must have standards to help students who are not native speakers of English reach English proficiency (Lee, 2018). At the time this was left for broad interpretation. It wasn't until after the state science standards (NGSS) were created in 2013 and the English language arts and mathematics (Common Core State Standards or CCSS) the year prior, that EL considerations related to NCLB were clarified. The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA of 2015 gave more specific demands related to English language standards. The first was that such standards must address the four domains of language which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Second, the standards must include English language proficiency levels, and thirdly, the standards must be aligned with the content standards (CCSS and NGSS) which are considered highly rigorous and language intensive for both native and non-native speakers of English (Lee, 2019).

Indiana Case Study

States could choose to develop their own English language proficiency standards or join the WIDA consortium developed in 2003 which was created to provide guidance for educators of multilingual students. The consortium also released their first edition of the English Language Development (ELD) Standards in 2003 though they are under continuous revision. Currently there are 41 states that are part of the WIDA consortium and the standards have been revised in 2012 and again in 2020 (Grapin & Lee, 2021).

The state of Indiana serves as an example of a state that has experienced the challenges discussed earlier related to the complexities of addressing the needs of multilingual students. Like many other states, it has experienced an exponential growth of

ML learners. For example, from the 2002-2003 to 2015-2016 school year, the number of MLs grew 165% and included 263 languages (Morita-Mullaney, 2017). Even with this influx of students with diverse language experiences, there remained no requirement for teachers to receive special licenses or training to serve these students in general education classrooms (Morita-Mullaney, 2016).

Morita-Mullaney (2016) looked at Indiana's process of implementing WIDA's English language development standards across the state from 2003 to 2016 and found some trends that are common among EL practitioners. In 2003 Indiana implemented their own language proficiency standards to follow NCLB mandates and, while having standards was a good starting point to address the inequalities certain students face in the school setting, teachers had still been struggling with carving their place in a system that has historically valued other more established programs such as special education and other leadership roles. English language specialists had not been valued for their expertise in language development, which in turn did not lead to considerable recognition of the state's English language proficiency standards. Teachers noted that the CCSS and NGSS had more weight in the eyes of classroom teachers and school administrators.

English language education leaders in the state of Indiana wanted to better align the state's English language proficiency standards with content standards, which led them to join the WIDA consortium in 2013. A positive outcome of joining the WIDA consortium, aside from gaining standards more closely aligned with content, was that the EL professionals in the state expressed feeling like a more legitimate part of the school with WIDA being an established organization backed by the majority of states across the country (Morita-Mullaney, 2016). However, some teachers did say that the information

available within the WIDA English language development standards was dense and unapproachable for both EL teachers and content teachers.

WIDA 2020 Standards

While WIDA has been shown to give more voice to the English language teaching profession, there are some challenges that WIDA editors attempt to address with every updated edition (Grapin & Lee, 2021). Lee (2018) dug into some of the challenges from the 2012 edition and gave recommendations on improvements for the 2020 revised edition. One issue that presented itself is the fact that content standards are not static. They are also revised frequently, which means language proficiency standards must keep up with these changes. What's more, there is little collaboration between those who develop the grade level standards between the different content areas of language arts, math, and science. This was an issue from 2012 that carries over to 2020 and it is considered a problem since the language demands for the subject areas may have little coherence. For example, the language used for argument, a disciplinary practice, looks different in practice in the state science standards than it does in the CCSS of language arts and mathematics.

One fault of the 2012 standards was that previously, the cognitive demands in the standards were not consistent throughout the English language proficiency levels (Lee, 2019). That is to say, a beginner English learner may be asked to show an understanding of the content through labeling a picture or diagram, while a more advanced learner of English would be tasked with showing their understanding through describing or explaining. Describing and explaining both carry a greater cognitive load than does

labeling. This puts limitations on multilingual learners who could excel in the content, but lack the English skills to demonstrate what they know.

The 2020 WIDA standards addressed this by centering multilingual students. To center a group of students means that their voices, experiences, and needs are at the center of all conversations and decisions made by educators. Those in charge of revising the 2020 WIDA standards started centering multilingual students more by changing the way in which they refer to students. Previously, to address students who qualify for English language support, they would use the acronym EL which stood for English learner. In the 2020 edition they moved to using the term “multilingual learner”, or ML for short. The term “English learner” perpetuated the idea that learning English is a deficit. This new term, however, encourages teachers to see multilingual learners as having valuable assets and skills (Grapin & Lee, 2020). One of the most significant changes in the recent revision of WIDA is honoring all languages and skills that students bring to the table (Grapin & Lee, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the 2012 edition made it difficult for students to show mastery when they were being limited to labeling versus explaining their understanding. To tackle this issue and center MLs, there was a shift towards valuing multimodal communication. Students should be encouraged to express themselves any way they can, which includes translanguaging, using visual material, or encouraging social language over academic language (Molle & Wilfrid, 2021). As Grapin & Lee (2021) put it, “MLs at the beginning levels are recognized for what they communicate in the content areas, regardless of how they communicate it...”(p. 835). We should be highlighting all skills and experiences ML students bring to the classroom. While the 2020 standards started to

tackle this discrepancy between cognitive load and language proficiency, the reality of putting this into practice hasn't yet been researched since the new standards were just recently introduced (Grapin & Lee, 2021).

The Common Core State Standards place high demands on all students, but especially those who are in a position of having to learn English while simultaneously learning the target content at any given grade level regardless of English proficiency. The updated WIDA 2020 standards try to correct shortcomings of the 2012 edition but there continue to be gaps in theory to practice of some of these changes (Grapin & Lee, 2021).

Writing and Speaking Domains

Out of the four domains of language, writing poses the great challenge to all students as it requires students to develop ideas, plan and organize their thoughts, translate these thoughts onto paper, and physically transcribe these ideas coherently (Blackstock-Bernstein et al., 2022). While speaking and listening are natural forms of communication, reading and writing are not and must be taught explicitly to learners of all ages and home environments. As the previous section explained, the CCSS and NGSS have developed high standards that all students are expected to meet by grade level and this includes working in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within the content areas of language arts, mathematics, and science. These standards are demanding especially for multilingual learners since they have double the cognitive demand with working in a new language and learning new content (Blackstock-Bernstein et al., 2022).

Learning to write for the sole purpose of writing is not enough. Students are being asked to write in different contexts, all that have unique language features and varying

audiences. These forms include argumentative, narrative, and informative writing (Blackstock-Bernstein et al., 2022). The language of informational writing has different features that sets it apart from others. Multilingual students need explicit instruction in using the features of informational writing. This includes the structural features such as comparing and contrasting, cause and effect, defining, and classifying. It also requires a solid understanding of transitional phrases and academic vocabulary (WIDA, 2020). Narrative writing also poses challenges to multilingual students since this form of writing often will switch between tenses and is heavy in transitional words and phrases (Blackstock-Bernstein et al., 2022). Lastly, there are language patterns in argumentative writing as well (WIDA, 2020). Writers need to present facts, they need to have strong thesis statements, and they need to know how to support claims with appropriate evidence (Blackstock-Bernstein et al., 2022). All of these features need to be taught explicitly to all students but multilingual learners need other support and scaffolding (Andrei et al., 2018).

There are strategies teachers can implement in their classrooms to help students find writing success. One such strategy is gaining more acceptance in the field of language acquisition and that is the use of a students L1, or home language, when interacting in school (Lopas et al., 2021). Previously the trend in language education was to fully separate L1 from English, as it was believed complete immersion in English would get students to a level of proficiency faster if they weren't relying on their home language (Short et al., 2018). However, the new WIDA standards of 2020 have a noticeable shift as they center language learners and place more value on the lived experiences and languages that they bring to the classroom.

A study done by Lopas et al. (2021) followed a veteran teacher's experience teaching several newcomer English learners in her language arts classroom. This teacher was not licensed in English language development and had little training in how to best support ML students, as is the case in many states throughout the country. Yet, throughout the study, she used a variety of activities and strategies for writing with her multilingual students and one of those strategies was to allow her newcomers to use their L1 first when writing before beginning the writing process in English. This allows students to demonstrate their knowledge using what they already know.

Other strategies include the use of graphic organizers and sentence starters or frames (Lopas et al., 2021), but Olson et al. (2015) highlights what is called 'strategy instruction' which is a highly beneficial practice to support language learners. This strategy explicitly teaches students how to form pieces of writing by modeling expected language through think-alouds and the actual processes involved with putting thoughts onto paper. There is a gradual release of responsibility, from modeling, to the opportunity for pair or group work, and then independent practice. English language learners benefit from explicit instruction and modeling as they make lesson objectives clear and approachable while the practice of allowing partner work gives ML students opportunities to practice language in a low affective filter environment.

Writing is a cognitively demanding task and with the expectation that students write for academic purposes and for multiple audiences in various contexts, effectively supporting ML students in this area is complex (Egan & Parrish, 2019). Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, out of all students who are learning English, only 8% show proficiency in writing (Lopas et al., 2021). All students need more time in school that is

dedicated specifically for writing, both formally and informally, and across content areas, not solely in language arts. Teachers should be finding areas where writing can be incorporated. This could look like writing brief responses to prompts, creating scaffolded graphic organizers, and having writing throughout daily routines.

Informal oral language develops before academic oral language and academic writing. So, before students even begin writing, they need to be processing their environment through speaking and interacting with peers in structured whole group or small group settings (Egan & Parrish, 2019). This should be done using whatever oral language resources a student has, either in their home language or English. Teachers then use the *mode continuum*, which will be discussed in more detail later, to support students as they go from informal oral production to more formal spoken language (Gibbons, 2015). Getting students to talk before writing is necessary to build background knowledge, make connections between personal experiences and content, encourage low-stakes peer interaction, and bridge known language to new language and vocabulary.

Historically, classroom talk is based on the IRE pattern which stands for initiation, response, and evaluation (Gibbons, 2015). It is a three-part exchange where a teacher will ask a question (the initiation stage) of a student that generally requires a short response of memorized information. The second stage is where students respond with a one word response or short phrase. Lastly, the teacher will repeat what the student said and either validate or correct their response. While it is known that teachers want students to be talking in a language class, this model does little to encourage authentic, meaningful, and robust communication.

Pauline Gibbons (2015) makes a case for a dialogic approach to improve not only the quantity of student speech in class, but also the quality of speech. Unlike the IRE model, the dialogic approach encourages students to brainstorm, question, hypothesize, and reach conclusions through speaking with teacher guidance. The teacher in these learning environments takes the role of facilitator while the students build language and vocabulary. Students are co-constructing new understandings of big concepts through authentic and meaningful dialogue.

Oral language and written language go hand in hand, but there is little research currently that compares these two forms of communication, especially research focusing on its connection to multilingual student development (Blackstock-Bernstein, et al., 2022). Even though there is a strong connection between oral and written language, students who demonstrate a command of spoken English are not always proficient in writing, which means teachers need to not make assumptions on a students' academic language based on natural domains of speaking and listening. Most research looks at early stages of oral development and few have looked at how this develops when students are beyond the primary years. All students, especially multilingual learners, need direct instruction and opportunities to practice speaking for academic and social purposes (Auslander, 2022).

One researcher however, who has written about the bridge from speaking to writing is Gibbons (2015). Speaking and writing are not separate from one another but rather there is a continuum between these two domains. Gibbons (2015) uses the term *mode continuum* to describe how students move from speaking to writing effectively and it has several distinct stages. First, students are engaged in talking about something that is

in the here-and-now, for example, a picture, or the visual aspects of an experiment happening in real time. In this stage students are using any language they are familiar with and speaking should be produced naturally within a group context. From there, a teacher takes what the students already know and names it with more formal, or academic, vocabulary. This brings students closer to the academic writing stage. Next, with support from a teacher, the class moves from the here-and-now and engages in reflection and constructs new meaning based on the initial step. This is done using the academic language presented in step two. Finally, students take this scaffolded language and are able to produce writing that uses academic vocabulary that was first practiced orally in a well planned environment.

Literate talk is the intentional progression from talking about what is known using informal language to the formal demands of written language (Gibbons, 2015). In this approach students are engaged in group work to support learning, whole group teacher guided activities to expand language, and writing to demonstrate and reflect on what was learned. One key word for all of these steps is *intentionality*. The group work students are engaged in, the academic language chosen, and the writing tasks should all be intentional and meaningful to the learning environment.

Current Curriculum

Before any real, authentic, and purposeful learning can take place, all teachers, no matter the content or context, must know the students who come into their classrooms. This is especially true when focusing on newcomer students who arrive throughout the year and deserve the same educational and social opportunities as their peers who may already have solid social networks and who have been in the United States either their

whole lives or the majority of their lives. To truly know a student encompasses many different aspects of their being. This includes knowing the educational background of newcomers (Short et. al., 2018). Some questions need to be asked to better understand the whole child. Did they have consistent access to a stable school environment in their home country? If not, how long of a gap in education have they experienced? Is the student proficient in foundational literacy in their home language? Do they have any experience interacting with English outside of their current school setting? These are questions educators need to consider before being able to address the academic needs of their students. To gain this academic background information teachers can do intake interviews with family before students enroll and they conduct a needs assessment to better understand incoming students holistically (Short et. al., 2018) .

What is equally, if not more important, is learning about their multilingual students on a personal level. This should be incorporated into classroom practices throughout the entirety of the school year and should not be limited to beginning of the year isolated activities (White, 2010). Instead, building on students' background knowledge, their home language skills, and their social interests and motivations guide classroom learning and instruction (Barr et al., 2012). Connecting learning to the lived experiences of students makes learning more meaningful and applicable to the world outside of the classroom setting .

While it is necessary to have a well rounded understanding of who our students are, it cannot be ignored that newcomers often experience varying levels of trauma that they carry with them due to multiple reasons unique to this group of students. The Newcomer Toolkit from the U.S. Department of Education (2016) organizes possible

core stressors students may face before and after entering the United States. These four core stressors include trauma, acculturation, isolation, and resettlement. An example of a traumatic event may be the experience of crossing a border or the separation from family members. Students experience acculturation stressors as they are in a position of having to adjust to a new culture and school environment. Being separated from family and being thrown into a new language are just two ways in which newcomer students experience isolation, another core stressor. Newcomers are exposed to situations that others may see as solely adult concerns. These include being present while the family navigates a legal system not in their favor or being exposed to financial hardship.

Because students come into schools with all of these heavy and complicated situations, there needs to be a push to implement social-emotional learning, or SEL, within the disciplinary curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). When students have strong social-emotional well-being they experience more academic success and social acceptance which is why SEL practices need to be interwoven across curricula and students need to be given opportunities to put these skills into practice. One way to put into practice honoring social-emotional learning is to focus on the whole child. The U.S. Department of Education Newcomer Toolkit (2016) gives the example of a school in Denver Colorado that focuses on the whole child. It is understood at this school that a student cannot learn if they come to school hungry or if they do not feel safe in their classroom. The social-emotional needs come before academics and testing.

So what practices demonstrate an understanding of fostering social-emotional learning for all students? There are six key teaching strategies that have been shown to address social-emotional needs and that are not limited to specific grade levels or content

areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These can be worked into all grade levels and demonstrate teaching that is student-centered allowing for more opportunities for growth and learning. One such strategy is the idea of cooperative learning. In this model, students work together to answer questions and tackle problems in a collaborative and supportive manner while at the same time learning grade-level content. As stated earlier, teachers must learn about their students and incorporate their skills and experiences into instructional practices, throughout the day and throughout the school year. To promote social-emotional learning, students should feel that their teacher or teachers care about them (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This looks like the teacher asking them questions, acknowledging their home language, and creating a physical environment that is welcoming, organized, and reflects students' cultures. Social-emotional learning should not be seen as a separate entity in school curriculum. It must place the students at the center of their educational experience since no learning can be done if their basic needs of acceptance, safety, power, and belonging are not being met.

There is an ongoing misconception that beginning language learners need to be proficient in English before they are capable of engaging in grade-level content and that students need simplified content and language due to the fact that they are not yet English-proficient (Alvarez et al., 2022). If students are exposed to the same content as their English-dominant peers, they will be stressed and will not be able to participate fully. In fact, both of these ideas have been proven to be untrue. These beliefs assume that English proficiency is correlated to cognitive abilities which is not only false, but is dangerous as it leads to newcomers being pushed to the sidelines while it also centers English as a superior language (Short, et al., 2018, p. 5). As stated above, newcomers and

all multilingual learners bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences that teachers need to tap into to provide students with access to rigorous grade-level content and standards (Musetti & Perez, 2009). The common core state standards require all students to be college and career ready by the end of high school by expecting them to master content while working in the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for multiple purposes (Barr et al., 2012). Multilingual learners should not be subject to watered-down, juvenile materials and learning opportunities.

Previously, the education of multilingual learners was focused on deficit-based instruction, meaning it was seen as a problem that needed correction when students spoke another language at home that was not English (Musetti & Perez, 2009). Fortunately, there has been a shifting mindset to asset-based instruction. This can be seen as WIDA 2020 moved towards the use of ‘multilingual’ rather than ‘English language learner’ (Grapin & Lee, 2021). By doing so, it decenters English as the more important language and it values other languages that students bring with them. This shift towards asset-based instruction is not only found in the language used by education professionals but also is part of classroom practices and teaching methods.

To move towards asset-based instruction that allows multilingual learners to participate in rigorous grade-level content, teachers use the language repertoires of students to bridge background knowledge to new learning and experiences while connecting subjects to their own lives (Alvarez et al., 2022). Multilingual learners can interact with grade level content when given opportunities to work in different modalities including the use of visuals, hands-on activities and project-based learning where students work together to investigate and solve real world problems. A language arts

lesson that demonstrates working with different modalities could include visuals, videos, real-life artifacts, opportunities to write both formally and informally, and opportunities to engage with classmates to explore the content and to build understanding.

Previously, the education of multilingual students tended to focus on pieces of language in isolation from content. Now it is understood that students learn best and progress more naturally when language is intertwined with content, another reason why it should not be the practice of watering down content and learning opportunities for language learners (Alvarez et al., 2022). Authentic, real-world lessons produce authentic, usable language, either for social or academic purposes. Authentic learning applies classroom learning to real-world situations which ultimately can increase motivation and student engagement.

Engaging ML students is important to their oral language development. Oral language is the first productive domain to develop which is why active participation in class and group work is essential for building language proficiency and content proficiency simultaneously (White, 2010). Alvarez et al.(2022) conducted a research study that attempted to address the question of how students use language to engage in academic tasks. This was done by creating two fifth grade science units that had intentional scaffolding and used multiple modalities including hands-on investigations, modeling, reading, writing, and discussions. They observed two newcomer students to see how they interacted with peers and made sense of social interactions while engaging in grade-level science class.

It was determined that while the lessons had ample scaffolding, what truly enabled these two newcomers to participate in class was their interaction with peers

during group work. There is a lot that goes into social interactions at school which means students are constantly making sense of their surroundings which leads to language growth. There were several key observations by these researchers. While interacting, students are building relationships with their peers and finding their place in the group hierarchy. They also are processing fast-paced speech while having to tune out unnecessary noise and distractions. Students need ample opportunities to produce language, but simply placing students in groups to work on problems is not enough. As in other areas of teaching, teachers need to create purposeful and well planned out opportunities to talk rather than being thrown into group work simply because it is seen as a good teaching strategy. Lessons and class routines need structure, consistency, and opportunities to engage with one another (White, 2010; Alvarez et. al. 2022).

Multilingual learners can and should be challenged to work with grade level content (Alvarez et al., 2022). The notions that knowing multiple languages is an asset and that students bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the classroom are the foundations of creating effective learning opportunities for multilingual learners. Before looking at any curriculum an educator must ask how it relates to diverse students and how it addresses their social-emotional needs.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed literature to build sufficient background knowledge related to the research question of how to best develop speaking and writing skills in upper elementary newcomer students. It also gave a look into gaps in the educational system regarding teacher preparation and research related to best practices for addressing the

educational needs of multilingual students who have many strong assets but need effective teachers and well designed school environments to reach their full potential.

It was necessary to look at teacher training programs followed by trends in teaching models to compare theory to practice and see how teachers are developing their skills for educating multilingual learners while considering the realities of school practice. WIDA provides English language standards and plays a significant role in influencing curriculum which is why this consortium was looked at next. The last two sections, speaking and writing and current curriculum gave a look into current understanding of how teachers should best incorporate language learning in the general education so that multilingual learners have access to the same rigorous curriculum as their peers.

The following chapter will explain a curriculum teachers in a fourth grade classroom can use to support the speaking and writing development of their newcomer students in relation to grade-level content standards.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

After working as an English language teacher for three years at a school that had a large number of newcomer students, I quickly realized that there are few resources available for beginner English learners who are in the upper elementary grades. There is a great deal of available resources for lower grades but this material is not suitable for older students. This chapter will describe my project and the rationale behind why this specific project was developed based on current research in the field of English language education.

There is a strong need for a curriculum that addresses the needs of emergent multilingual learners that is appropriate for upper elementary and that can be easily aligned with current grade level content standards as created by The Common Core. Emergent multilinguals are those who have little to no experience with English. The challenge of not having a suitable curriculum or enough time to plan lessons for my students is what led me to the following research question: *How can teachers best provide writing and speaking opportunities for upper elementary newcomer multilingual students in a content classroom?* First, this chapter will give an overview of the curriculum which was connected to specific state standards. Next, it will give a setting where this project is planned to be implemented and who it would best serve. Finally, there will be a look at research theory and a timeline for the project.

Project Overview and Design Framework

This project is a curriculum for fourth grade newcomer students that aligns with the fourth grade English language arts (ELA) standards from The Common Core along with the new WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) 2020 English Language Development Framework. My experience co-teaching in a fourth grade classroom with nine newcomer students led me to choose this grade level and content area as a focus for this project. It was difficult throughout the year knowing how to best scaffold instruction for students who were new to learning English but who were expected to already have foundational literacy and social skills. This curriculum focuses on the productive domains of speaking and writing. These are two domains that are assessed through the WIDA ACCESS (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) state testing along with reading and listening. However, the productive domains are the focus for this curriculum.

There has been a push to keep multilingual students in the general education classroom as much as possible throughout the school day which is why when planning this curriculum it was necessary to align it with grade level content standards from Minnesota. These standards are not a curriculum but they give teachers an understanding of what students should be able to do within the content areas. For example, the language arts standards do not give teachers a list of required readings to complete by the end of the year. Rather, the standards for ELA lay out what students will do either in reading, writing, listening, and speaking within any curriculum a school chooses to use. There are three ELA writing standards that this project focuses on and they are numbered 4.2.2.2,

4.2.3.2, and 4.2.5.2 (2020 Minnesota K-12 English Language Arts Standards Commissioner Approved Draft).

The first standard asks students to write for a variety of purposes and connect their personal experiences to those of characters found in literary texts. They are also expected to connect to events and people in nonfiction texts. In this curriculum students work with a fiction text which is why this standard was chosen. It is important that teachers are intentional about the books that students read in class and they should reflect the lived experiences of their students. That is why students are asked to compare and contrast their lives and opinions to characters in a book that shows cultural diversity. The next standard meshes with the previous. It says that by the end of fourth grade students should have experience in the writing process which includes planning, writing, editing, and publishing. When students are working with the narrative text they are also engaged in this writing process that is based on the *mode continuum* from Gibbons (2015). The last language arts standard has students respond to the conclusion of a literary text. Throughout the unit, students make connections between the main character in the literary text Efrén Divided and their own lives using various class-created charts and posters. Students will use previous classwork to create a written response to the fictional novel.

These Common Core content standards include both narrative and informational writing that students are expected to produce. This aligns with WIDA 2020 Standard Two: Language for Language Arts. In the 2020 edition of WIDA they found patterns in the types of language used within each content area and it was found that ELA mostly asks students to use specific language to narrate and inform. Since this curriculum

focuses on expressive language (writing and speaking), the two WIDA language standards that are the focus of these units will be ELD-LA.4-5.Inform.Expressive and ELD-LA.4-5.Narrate.Expressive (WIDA, 2020). Both of these align with The Common Core standards for fourth grade language arts and both are used for writing and speaking.

This curriculum pulls heavily from Pauline Gibbon's (2015) work on bridging oral language to academic writing since these language domains are the focus for this novel study. The *mode continuum* supports the teaching and learning process as students first engage with what they know or what is physically in front of them. This is done through whole-group and peer verbal interaction. Then, moving on from the here-and-now, students report back on their findings and the physical or visual support is no longer present. Students must rely on what they observed and learned from their previous interactions. Gradually this verbal processing moves toward written expression and the written products incorporate more academic language that was explicitly taught earlier in the continuum (Gibbons, 2015). This curriculum shows various stages of the mode continuum as a bridge to speaking and writing. It will be made clear to the teacher which part of the lessons demonstrate this process as the lessons include a bridging symbol to draw attention to specific speaking and writing practices.

There are both formative and summative assessments throughout these units. They are connected to both the language standards from WIDA as well as the language arts content standards. Since there are students who arrive that have no literacy background in their home language, these assessments take into account multiple means of production. One student may be able to write complete paragraphs in Spanish and short paragraphs in English. Another student may rely more heavily on labeling pictures

and writing individual sentences. In terms of assessing a student's speech production, the silent period needs to be considered. Newly arrived students sometimes go through a silent phase that can last weeks to months (Krashen, 1981). Because of this, these summative and formative assessments are meant to measure a student's personal growth rather than compare students to one another.

The process of designing this curriculum follows the Backward Design framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The content and language objectives, or what students will be expected to do by the end of each unit, was planned first to guide the rest of the curriculum. It is especially important to use Backward Design since there needs to be clear goals on how students will be interacting with language arts content and how they will demonstrate their understanding through language production.

Since multilingual learners spend the majority of their time in content area classrooms, there is a need for a curriculum that includes both language standards and content standards. This is especially true when there are students who are new to the country and who are in an upper elementary grade level. In fourth grade students are asked to read long novels and respond to a range of writing tasks related to narrative and informal writing. There is a need for a curriculum that supports their language and content development.

Project Setting

This curriculum is intended to be used in a fourth grade classroom that has many emerging level English learners. More specifically, this curriculum was based off of my current EL teaching position which is at a bilingual school where the majority of students are native speakers of Spanish. I made this project for my own use but plan on sharing the

final product with other classroom teachers and EL teachers from other schools that may have a large number of Spanish speaking students.

Last year I co-taught language arts in a classroom where a third of the students were newcomer, or emerging, English learners. I attempted to co-plan with the classroom teacher but, as is often the case, there was little time to meet and design scaffolds for these nine students who I would work with every day for an hour. In this particular school setting we have students constantly enrolling throughout the year and we must determine their literacy levels in English and in Spanish. In fact, in the month of March alone we had three newcomer students join the class with only two months left of the school year. This curriculum is intended to support all newcomer students regardless of when they start school.

The school is made up of around 90% Latino students and out of the over 500 students enrolled, 60% qualify to receive English language support. However, those 60% of students are very diverse. Some speak Spanish but have low literacy skills in both languages, which is one reason why they have not been able to exit the EL program. Most were born in the United States, but this curriculum is focused on those who have recently arrived in Minnesota. The students from the fourth grade co-taught classroom were from Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador and had varying levels of literacy backgrounds. Most were able to read and write but a few were at basic letter-sound correspondence in their home language of Spanish. Even though only one language aside from English was represented in this group, they all brought personal lived experiences to our small group. It is important that this curriculum allows them to express themselves even if they have low literacy skills in both languages.

Positionality as a Researcher

I came to this school as a white, middle-class woman with a college degree. I am fluent in Spanish which has helped me build strong relationships with my students as it has allowed them to feel comfortable communicating throughout the year. We have valued their use of translanguaging and it was clear that both Spanish and English could be used simultaneously. Even with that being said, the reality is that I learned Spanish by choice. Being bilingual has opened up many doors for me. My students, on the other hand, are expected to learn English in order to survive in this country and its educational system. Each year that they do not gain proficiency in English it becomes increasingly more difficult to catch up to their peers in middle school and high school.

After graduating high school it was expected that I continue on with obtaining at least a four-year degree. It was also expected that I take college-level courses in high school to receive college credit and be more competitive when applying to universities. The students I work with come from families that have parents who did not go to college or who did not graduate from high school. Several students have parents who are not able to read and write in Spanish. These families value education but they have not had the same opportunities that I was given while growing up. Lastly, I am a U.S. citizen. Some of these students arrived without proper documentation and fear that their parents will be deported. There was never space to learn when this fear was expressed to me.

These students are eager to learn and be accepted by their peers. Their home life and educational background should not prevent them from participating in engaging school curriculum. In fact, they have unique personalities and stories that only they can

share and my stance as a white, middle-class woman shouldn't prevent them from expressing their unique interests and opinions.

Connection to Research

There were several different researchers that influenced the layout of my curriculum for newcomer students. This research relates to trends in current EL teaching methods, the WIDA 2020 Framework, and how to best address the needs of newcomer multicultural students in elementary classrooms.

As described in Chapter Two, there is a trend in English language education to have multilingual students in the same classes as their peers and receive the same content. The challenges and benefits of doing a push-in model where English learners are in the same physical class was studied by Whiting (2017). They found that while EL teachers had struggles such as experiencing a lack of authority when pushing into classrooms, and not having enough physical space to teach, there were also some benefits of this model. One benefit of pushing into the content classroom was that the EL teacher could have a better understanding of the content being taught. Being on the same page with curriculum between a classroom teacher and an EL teacher is a sign of an effective co-teaching model, but more often than not this collaboration does happen, according to Baecher & Bell (2017). This curriculum is meant to support EL teachers who push into language arts classes but who are required to teach the same ELA standards as a general classroom teacher. Aligning the curriculum to grade level standards is meant to alleviate stress and provide strong learning opportunities for emergent English language learners.

Another connection to research comes from Grapin & Lee (2020) and their look into the WIDA 2020 Framework and its language standards. The WIDA standards for

language arts play an important role in creating this curriculum with a focus on expressive language. Within WIDA Standard Two, students from all English language levels are asked to produce language to narrate and inform. This curriculum consists of units where students will be reading and writing both narrations and informational texts since both ask students to interact with language in different ways. Grapin & Lee (2020) point out that one difference between the 2012 standards and the 2020 standards of WIDA is that this updated version makes a distinction between what language is most prevalent in the content areas. In language arts, the key language uses are to narrate and inform which lead me to connect WIDA Standard Two to the content standards for language arts.

There were researchers who influenced what types of texts I chose when designing this project. Short et al. (2018) gave six key principles that make an “exemplary” teacher of English learners. One of those principles is that teachers need to get to know each student individually and create a positive relationship that lasts throughout the school year. Students have opportunities to make personal connections throughout the units in this curriculum to help foster camaraderie between teacher and classmates. Another key component that needs to be considered is finding texts that resonate with the students who are immigrants, speak Spanish, and who come from Latin American countries. Short et al. (2018) said that in order for students to feel welcome they need to see themselves represented in the curriculum. This project revolves around texts that show a variety of immigrant experiences since no two experiences are alike. Students build connections between their personal lives and the lives of the characters in the fictional texts.

Timeline

This project was completed at the end of December 2022, which means it could be used starting the second half of the school year between January and May of 2023. This curriculum is aligned with grade level language arts standards which may prove itself more useful at different times throughout the school year depending on the scope and sequence of the general classroom. It is meant to be aligned with the general classroom when EL teachers are pushing into the class for this time frame. However, if a teacher finds it useful for small group instruction it may be used in that context as well.

Conclusion

This chapter gave an overview of the curriculum which included its connection to content and language standards. It also explained the context in which this curriculum would take place and who it was created for. Lastly, there was a connection to research that helped me create a curriculum that reflects current research and best practices for teaching multilingual students in a content area classroom. The question that led me to this project is, *How can teachers best provide writing and speaking opportunities for upper elementary newcomer multilingual students in a content classroom?* Chapter Four answers this question and provides a reflection on my curriculum project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

In my second year of teaching English to multilingual students, I was fortunate enough to work with a group of fourth grade students who were all eager to learn and enjoyed participating in the community we formed. What also made this group so unique was the fact that they came to the United States from Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras when they were in upper elementary and previously had little interaction in English. Those that arrived earlier, in second grade, had their schooling and language growth interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. I had worked with these students for the majority of the day in the content classrooms but struggled to wrap my head around how to best support their language development needs while ensuring they are able to interact with grade level content, specifically language arts which does not have as much hands-on or visual learning as science or social studies.

The purpose of this project was to answer the question, *How can teachers best provide writing and speaking opportunities for upper elementary newcomer multilingual students in a content classroom?* No matter what grade a student enters into a school in the United States, they are still expected to meet the high demands of standards-based instruction and state testing. The Common Core State Standards expect teachers to provide rigorous learning experiences and newcomer students need to juggle not only learning a new language but they also need to keep up with their peers in other academic areas.

This final chapter will start by exploring some key learnings through the development of this thesis project. From there it will revisit the literature review of chapter two and elaborate on some of the most important findings. Finally, it will look at potential implications this project has, its limitations, and what it means for future work.

Key Learnings

There have been both personal and professional realizations or key learnings that I have discovered about myself through this thesis process. On a personal level, the last few months have challenged me in unexpected ways which has opened my eyes to what type of learner I am, and it has also opened my eyes to how my students may feel in school. I have always thought of myself as a studious person who enjoys reading and digging into topics of high interest. When I landed on a research question that reflected the challenges of my teaching environment, I was all-in with finding case studies and research-backed evidence for the literature review. However, this led to information overload.

The articles and case studies for my research topic reflected some of my biggest struggles as a multilingual teacher who supports students in their general education classrooms. There were several case studies that examined the challenges of evolving best practice for English language education in the public school system. Others focused on states' interpretations of federal and state laws surrounding English language instruction. As much as I related to these readings, at times it was not always easy to condense what was read or decide what information best related to my research question without branching too far out. Though my students have it much more difficult since they are learning a new language, in a new country, while having to keep up with grade level

academics, this feeling of information overload on my part reminded me that students can only process so much information at one time. They are also trying to make connections and synthesize information all day which can be tiring and frustrating.

On a more professional level, there was one key learning that stood out during the literature review process. As mentioned earlier, there are shifts happening around best practice for educating multilingual students in school. The concept of co-teaching, or when an English language (EL) specialist teaches and plans with the general classroom teacher, seems to be growing in popularity. This is meant to provide all learners with the best language-rich education while it also avoids removing language learners from their peers. This, in theory, sounds like an ideal practice for both student and teacher. However, in my experience it can often feel messy and unproductive without proper guidance and co-planning time. Many of the articles explored these issues and had real-life examples of EL teachers across the country experiencing similar situations. This literature review drew my attention to the fact that this is a national issue, one that stems from a lack of consistency across the board in terms of how to best address the needs of EL students.

Revisiting the Literature Review

There were several resources from the literature review that shaped the development of the thesis product, a language arts curriculum for fourth grade newcomer students with a focus on speaking and writing. One of those resources was the book *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning* by Gibbons (2015). The big takeaway from Gibbons' work was the idea of creating a bridge between a student's social language to academic written language through a multistep process. To start, students are exposed to visuals or hands-on learning which allows them to talk about what is directly in front of

them using what language and vocabulary students already have in their language repertoire. From there, they are guided to discuss, or reflect, on previous experiences. The teacher then builds context-specific vocabulary and language to take what students already know and turn it into academic language. The final step involves using the new academic language in formal writing which all students need in classrooms. This concept of building on what students already know to scaffold academic writing drove the planning of each lesson for the capstone product, which was a language arts curriculum. The curriculum was a novel study for the book titled *Efren Divided* by Ernesto Cisneros and the lessons focused heavily on student comprehension of the book's main events and character traits while also incorporating speaking and writing opportunities.

Another source that guided the creation of the curriculum was the WIDA, or World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, and its 2020 English Language Development Framework. WIDA consortium provides participating states with language standards across K-12 schools. The standards were updated in 2020 and provided both EL teachers and classroom teachers with a better understanding of what language patterns appear in specific academic contents. For this project I looked at the language most commonly found in language arts which lead me to focus on narration and the language used to inform. The WIDA 202 standards helped when planning lessons around the expressive language of speaking and writing.

Implications and Limitations

One of the greatest implications from this product is the fact that I personally will use the concept of bridging between spoken informal language to academic writing in my future teaching placements. This *mode continuum* concept comes from Gibbons (2015)

and challenged me to be more intentional with planning lessons and units that strategically incorporate speaking and writing opportunities. Even though this curriculum was a novel study specifically for upper elementary school, the idea of bridging language should be used across content areas and grade levels.

Before doing research for this product, I had not heard of the *mode continuum*. I had a fairly solid understanding of the importance of scaffolding language production, but the concept of moving from social speaking to formal writing was not in my knowledge base until now. Because I previously didn't know this concept as an English language teacher for several years, I believe there are plenty of language teachers who are unaware of this multistep process as well. A hope for this product is to share it with other language teachers and even content teachers even though they may not be reading the same novel in their classrooms. The activities and language expectations are patterns that can be used across novel studies and across grade levels.

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations on this project is the fact that I was not able to test out this curriculum on a real group of students. The idea to create a curriculum suited for this specific situation stemmed from my previous teaching environment where I taught a group of nine newcomer, Spanish speaking students in fourth grade. While this was a relatively specific environment, the curriculum should be able to reach across grade levels and languages of students.

Another limitation could be the difference in time allocation for language arts instruction. The curriculum created through this thesis project allocated 50 minutes per school day for language arts. The first few minutes of each lesson were dedicated to

pre-teaching strategies such as building background knowledge and frontloading vocabulary while the last few minutes were reserved for writing opportunities. Not all fourth grade classes would have this much time for reading a novel or time for pre and post instruction.

Future Work

As mentioned earlier, before creating this curriculum project and before beginning this entire process, I was not aware of the concept of bridging social spoken language to formal written language in the manner described by Pauline Gibbons (2015). As an English language teacher, I was taught that spoken language develops before written abilities since speaking is a natural human skill. However, the explicit steps to build upon discussing the here-and-now to writing and reflecting on previous learning by using more academic vocabulary was new to me. This research project has the opportunity to make the concept of bridging more well known by language and general classroom teachers. My hope is that by showing a novel that incorporates bridges between speaking and writing, teachers will find ways to ensure their multilingual students are given opportunities to work on these productive domains of language in a supportive and structured environment.

The protagonist of this novel study curriculum is a middle schooler who lives in California. His parents are from Mexico but he must deal with his mother being deported back across the United States and Mexico border. My hope is that this capstone project adds to the work done to promote more culturally diverse literature in public schools. Students should be reading about characters they can relate to who speak similar languages and may go through similar personal experiences. Teachers need to be

intentional when choosing what novel studies are done in their classrooms since The United States is becoming more and more diverse.

Conclusion

Chapter four was a reflection on the thesis capstone project and it synthesized key learnings. First, it provided both a personal and professional reflection on the learning process, specifically during the research in chapter two literature review. From there, this chapter summarized key sources that stood out in the literature and how these sources influenced the development of the curriculum product. Then this chapter looked at both implications and limitations of this capstone. Finally it offered suggestions for future work and acknowledged the importance of finding reading material that represents different perspectives and voices to highlight student voice.

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