

REFEREED ARTICLE

Effective Sheltered Content Instruction for English Language Learners

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Abstract

With the continued influx of youth newcomers in public schools, teachers need more supports to meet the diverse academic and linguistic needs of English Language Learners (ELLs). This article focuses on a sheltered content basis for instruction, whereby content area curriculum and language learning are taught simultaneously. Effectiveness and challenges of sheltered content instruction is discussed, and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is suggested as a framework for high quality teaching. With the support of a strong administrative team, trained teachers of SIOP, and collaboration among a school team, SIOP can serve as an effective tool for teaching ELLs.

In 2018-2019, Canada welcomed 313, 580 immigrants, one of its highest numbers in history (Statistics Canada, 2019). By the year 2020, Canada's high projection for newcomers including immigrants, federal nominees, family reunification, and refugees is 360,000 (Government of Canada, 2019). With the continued influx of newcomers, schools are faced with challenges for appropriate programming for English language learners (ELLs). In an attempt to address the diverse needs of ELLs, public schools are advocating sheltered content instruction (Figueroa-Murphy et al., 2016). Sheltered content programming can be an appropriate method of instruction; however, if poorly designed and implemented, it can result in wide achievement gaps and academically ill prepared students (Calderon et al., 2011). In order for sheltered content instruction to be effective, teachers and administrators need to understand its purpose, possess knowledge of language acquisition methodologies, and receive appropriate training and professional development. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is the only empirically validated approach to sheltered instruction and learning intervention (Short, 2013). With rigorous teacher professional development, SIOP can support ELLs who are developing their academic language and knowledge of core subject curriculum (Echevarria & Short, 2011). When implemented to a high degree, SIOP can serve as an effective school-wide intervention.

Teachers and administrators must have clear understanding of sheltered instruction implementation. In sheltered content classes, core academic subjects such as science, mathematics, history, and English language arts are taught to ELLs through the integration of language development. The purpose is to make content comprehensible for students while developing academic English proficiency through access to the core curriculum (Echevarria et al., 2017). Sheltered content area instruction can be an effective program for students, but teachers must understand that it is not watered down curriculum and target outcomes must be at appropriate grade level (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). In addition, instruction must promote the development of academic language, be cognitively challenging, and provide access to academic content (Cummins, 1999). Students must also receive daily opportunities to engage in grade-level curriculum that supports the development of academic language and meets curricular outcomes simultaneously. In many sheltered content classrooms, instruction is solely language focused. When this occurs, teachers limit instructional rigor and academic expectations (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016) and the result is academically ill prepared students in areas of academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Short, 2013). In addition to sheltered content instruction knowledge, teachers and administrators need to possess an understanding of second language acquisition methodologies.

Language acquisition plays a significant role in considering programming needs for ELLs. Many educators have not received proper training or professional development in understanding the processes of second language learning. As a result, they are ill equipped to address the diverse needs of ELLs in sheltered content classrooms (Cummins et al., 2012). Many sheltered content classrooms focus primarily on the development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS, which takes approximately 1-2 years to develop. This type of language is known as survival language that is context embedded, meaningful, and not cognitively demanding (Mozayan, 2015). Examples include simple grammar, writing for personal needs, high frequency vocabulary, common vocabulary, initial reading skills, and the language needed to carry out basic, day-to-day tasks (Roessingh, 2006). ELLs will develop BICS quickly because it is not cognitively demanding and because survival language is used on a daily basis. The second type of language development is CALP, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, the type of language needed for effective engagement in academic study (Mozayan, 2015). The development of academic language takes approximately 5-7 years. In a well-implemented ESL program, CALP is addressed through an infusion of curriculum-related content. Lessons are designed to reflect a shift from learning to read to reading to learn, abstract thought is incorporated, and there is extensive use of reading, writing, and development of academic vocabulary (Roessingh, 2006). When instruction focuses solely on the development of BICS, students are less academically prepared. This highlights the importance of appropriately trained teachers.

Teachers must have an understanding of second language methodologies and core curriculum in order to support ELLs. They must also be familiar with appropriate instructional strategies and techniques to provide appropriate instruction. This requires additional training and professional development, which are not provided in most teacher training programs. Ultimately, this lies as the responsibility of individual school divisions (Short, 2013) and, if not addressed, teachers are not prepared to teach in ways that facilitate language acquisition and content development (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). In sheltered programming where language acquisition is the primary target, trained language teachers struggle because they are expected to integrate content area outcomes, but are not curriculum experts. Conversely, content area teachers who are not trained language teachers possess excellent knowledge of their curriculum, but are not trained in language acquisition and strategies to promote language development. As a result, in many mainstream classes, students are expected to reach high academic standards without receiving appropriate accommodations as second language learners. In each scenario, there is a lack of support and appropriate integration of both language and content outcomes. However, if language and content area teachers work in collaboration with an appropriate teaching framework, they will be able to support the unique linguistic and educational needs of ELLs (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). This requires the influence of a strong administrative team.

Programming decisions are made by administrators who often do not possess an understanding of the diverse needs of ELLs and the type of programs they require. It is critical for school leaders to be actively involved in offering appropriate programming for ELLs, continuing to monitor their effectiveness, and ensuring that students are developing academic skills (Chen, 2019). An effective approach to ESL program delivery, which supports teachers and fosters academic language learning, is the SIOP model. With SIOP, content area and language teachers have the opportunity to work collaboratively to meet the needs of newcomer students. SIOP was developed during a seven-year research study funded by the U.S. Department of Education and sponsored by the National Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). During the first stages of the study, researchers worked with teams of teachers to determine the most effective teaching practices. The information gathered was used to create an observation tool with a purpose of measuring the degree of implementation of sheltered instruction, and the effects and variations of the model were studied over four years (Short et al., 2011). The final result was SIOP, a lesson

planning and delivery approach that provides high quality instruction, cooperative learning, and reading comprehension strategies to integrate language and content objectives (Short et al., 2011). Although teachers are required to follow a specific framework of instruction, SIOp still allows teachers to maintain their unique teaching styles.

With SIOp, teachers still have flexibility in teaching styles and lesson delivery, and may accomplish language and content objectives in different ways (Short et al., 2011). SIOp has 30 features grouped into eight parts: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment (Echevarria et al., 2017). The 30 features are detailed and provide comprehensive steps for teachers (Koc, 2016). Teachers are observed by colleagues or administrators and are given feedback as means of reflection and improving teaching. For this purpose, an observation tool with a five-point scale is used to gather quantitative data to determine the degree of implementation of the strategies (Echevarria et al., 2017). In addition to quantitative data, qualitative data in the comments section of the observation tools provides opportunities for meaningful discussion. Although SIOp provides teachers with a framework for instruction and support, teachers and administrators must receive appropriate training in order for it to be effectively implemented.

Before SIOp can be used as a school-wide intervention, teachers and administrators must be properly trained and committed to at least 1-2 years of rigorous training (Short et al., 2011). This training is available through conferences, online professional development, and individual books targeted for administrators and specific content area teachers, including math, science, social studies, and English language arts (Echevarria et al., 2017). In addition to rigorous training, teachers must receive ongoing supports, including coaching, collaborative lesson planning and continued professional development (Short et al., 2017). Participating schools must therefore give teachers time to develop the skills, design a supportive program, provide lots of support, involve administration, and facilitate opportunities to observe and measure teacher implementation (Short et al., 2011). When considering a change in programming to SIOp, it is critical to select teachers who are not already overcommitted, because the time commitment required to implement SIOp is significant (Koc, 2016). Additionally, high quality of collaboration between language and content area teachers is critical (Baecher & Bell, 2017). Because SIOp is designed to improve academic language proficiency and is rigorous, the same rigor in relation to professional development should be provided for teachers.

As immigration continues to rise in Canada, educators are struggling meeting the diverse needs of newcomer students. As a result, ELLs demonstrate weaker academic proficiency in relation to native-English speaking peers (Echevarria & Short, 2011). Although schools are implementing language programs, many lack consistency and emphasis on a combination of language and appropriate grade-level learning. In order for language learners to be successful, they must develop their academic skills and have access to core curriculum (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). Teachers and administrators must also have a better understanding of sheltered instruction and language acquisition, in order to implement appropriate programming for ELLs. In addition, they must receive training and professional development that is extensive and supported on an ongoing basis. Research shows that many ELL programs do not prepare students academically because the primary focus is language acquisition rather than content area development (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). When teachers work collaboratively, students can learn and achieve at high levels. Content area and language development teachers each bring unique expertise in teaching ELLs. Working collaboratively by using a research-based approach such as SIOp will help to close the achievement gap of ELLs and native speakers of English. Through the integration of academic language development and core subject curriculum, ELLs will be academically better prepared for success in today's society.

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