

Integrating Social and Academic Language in a College Classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses limited English language proficiency and literacy skills of students who are not proficient in the English language. It outlines information about comprehensible input and scaffolding along with ESOL instructional approaches and language strategies. This paper theoretical foundations of second language acquisition of students attending a Higher Education Institution (HEIs). A summary of various instructional strategies and approaches aligned with curriculum, instruction and assessment to educate students at HEIs. The emphasis providing teachers with strategies to integrate language and academic content in the mainstream classroom for limited English proficient students reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, academic English, and social skills necessary for students to succeed in HEIs.

Keywords: achievement gaps, social, academic, language, English, minority, African Americans, educators, teachers, strategies, methods, techniques

Introduction

Students in the United States are increasingly diverse reflected on universities campuses. Diversity encompasses students from many races, ethnicities, genders, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds. Today's universities more than ever before consist of diverse students who come from minority groups with educational challenges. They bring social and academic language differences at various language proficiency levels. Students come from public schools across the nation where limited English language proficiency students continue to struggle with persistent academic achievement gaps. School systems confront challenges of high poverty from high minority populations. Longitudinal data reveals that Hispanic and African American students have lower standardized test scores than any other ethnic or racial groups. According to the NAEP (2005) one out of four Hispanic student reads below the basic reading levels, and one out of five African American student reads below the basic required reading level. United States Census Bureau (2006) predicted the US population that 50% of the school population will consist of African American, Hispanic and Asian students. Due to minority students who have not attained a high degree of English language proficiency and academic achievement in the academic English language struggle with corresponding academic language proficiency. The disparity indicates students who have special educational needs.

However, many of these students do not have special needs. They just have not made the connection between their social and academic needs in mainstream classrooms. Also, educators have not identified the need to change their methods of teaching to become inclusive of cultural and language needs of all students. Unfortunately, many educators, do not understand how culturally and linguistically diverse students acquire a second language. Consequently, Higher Education experience an increase in students are who The English Language are Learners (LELLs). According to Hurst (2015) LELLs have identified difficulties connecting to the abstract intensity of academic language. The research suggests that the process of integrating academic literacy (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) may have to be accompanied with targeted support for ELLs. Hansen- Thomas and Sourdout (2015) found the severe educational crisis in the United States regarding the ability of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to recruit, retain and graduate appropriately ELLs. The number of undocumented ELLs who attend U.S. high schools and universities who cannot meet the requirements to stay or graduate from these schools and universities. The authors identified how cracks in the academic pipeline negatively affect ELLs.

Who are Limited English Language Learners?

Limited English Language Learners (LELL) are a heterogeneous group that brings differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds, native language, socioeconomic status, quality of prior schooling, and English language proficiency levels to HEIs. They have also been identified as “The English language of Limited English Proficient” (LEP) to refer to students who are learning English language skills or acquiring a second language so that the focus is on the development of these students’ language and academic abilities. HEIs’ professors and faculty are academic content teachers. Content teachers are those teachers who are experts in their field of study, and a primary population of students is native English speakers, and who teach their courses through an English Language format. The process of effectively educating these students requires diagnosing each student's language ability, adjusting instruction accordingly and closely monitoring their progress. When students are admitted to HEIs, the student should be literate in the English language so they can apply academic vocabulary knowledge in academic content courses. However, the number of college students who lack social and academic language is increasing in HEIs as based on the number of students who enters and the number of students who graduate after four years. Professors are noticing that many college students lack the social and academic language to be successful in academic content courses. Limited English proficiency students in an English language school setting contribute to persistent academic achievement gaps between English language learners and English-proficient students (Calderon, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011). Academic achievement gaps have grave consequences for students and society as a whole. Many of these students' experience social and academic language deficiencies during early childhood education and persist throughout their secondary education years.

The Theoretical Foundations

Most of English language research-based classroom practices based on the theories presented by Krashen (1981, 1985, 1992) Cummins (1979, 1984, 2000), LELL learns social rules of the English language to speak, read, write, and listen to different people in different situations. The English language serves seven different functions: instrumental function (use of language to satisfy wants and needs); regulatory function (use of language to control behavior of other); Interactional function (use of language to exchange information with others); Personal function (use of language to maintain contact with others); heuristic function (use of language to assert identity, make choices, and take responsibility); Imaginative function (use of language to pretend and create images); and informative function (use of language to inform).

Cummins (1979) made the distinction between two different kinds of language proficiency. He designed the conceptual framework using quadrants to determine the language function from context embedded to context-reduced and of the degree of cognitive involvement required for communication from social or cognitive undemanding to academic cognitive demanding. The context-embedded language supports a broad range of environmental cues. LELPL experiences with the language before formal schooling are usually communication between family members or friends talking about familiar topics. Most of the instruction in a college classroom is context reduced since the teacher is facilitating academic content or teach new skills. Educators can facilitate language development by providing LELLs with information in the form of comprehensible input to expand knowledge of the language system. It is important to provide students with repeated opportunities to test their hypothesis in different situations and environments to confirm their conclusions. The development of English language proficiency takes many years and will not be achieved by all LELLs especially if they were not identified and provided support services for English language development during their elementary and secondary school years.

According to Cummins (2001) Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALP) defines the stages of how LELPLs acquire language. BICS are surface skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing which are acquired quickly by LELPL students, particularly by students who share language backgrounds similar to English language and spend time interacting with English language speakers. CALP is the basis for a student's ability to understand the academic demands required from various academic content subjects. While many LELL students develop BICS within the early years of their education, it takes between 5-7 years for a student to be working on an academic language level of English language proficiency. During the BICS stage, students develop a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate with simple phrases and sentences. They will ask simple statements, that may or may not be grammatically correct such as "He do not have a book" instead "He does not have a book." ELLs will also initiate short common language conversations with classmates and peers.

They will understand specific content with the support of visuals or demonstration or hands-on activities. They will also be able to complete academic content work with the teacher support. Teachers may use some simple activities to complete: Read short, modified texts in content area subjects and recite vocabulary words with definitions. ELLs at the intermediate language proficiency stage have a vocabulary of 6000 operative words. They use more complex sentences when speaking and writing and express opinions and share their thoughts. They ask questions to clarify what they are learning in class. They will be able to work at the academic level in math and science courses with some teacher support. However, comprehension of academic content is the most complex task. At this stage, students will use strategies from their native language to learn academic content in English.

Bunch (2014) found that teachers did not use academic language and social language as a means of conceptualizing what counts as "academic" language to maximize English language opportunities. The emphasis on how students use language to engage in academic tasks makes it possible to consider (a) the accomplishments related to academic tasks, both individually and in concert with others, the use of language to make sense, (b) the broad range of linguistic resources that students need to complete an academic task, including social language and (c) student responsiveness and strategic use of social and academic language for different purposes and audiences.

According to Ridgell and Lounsbury (2004) cognitive development refers to mental or intellectual ability. Consequently, cognitive factors appear to be more directly connected to student academic achievement. Many social factors support academic achievement. Successful students maintain a balance between social and academic language aspects of the school.

The achievement gap increases due to the language development and literacy skills of students with a significant deficiency in English language proficiency. According to Swain (2015), these challenges may be the result of both actual differences in the treatment of students in the classrooms and the inability of educators to understand students, and be proactive to and inclusive to learning styles, culture, social and academic language. Stigmatized students often perceive barriers to education and certain career paths due to their socioeconomic status. The radical transformation into an all-inclusive university where all students from all cultures and language backgrounds can receive a four-year degree on time. Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) focuses on benefits of diversity, inclusion, and cultural awareness. Students can participate in an educational program designed to provide academic, social, cultural, and support services to English Language Learners (ELLs) who need English language development courses due to their limited English language proficiency.

Rance-Roney (2008) found educators did not form intentional learning communities within their classrooms. They must provide scaffolding for limited English language students to acquire English and pass statewide certifications exams. Students' knowledge benefits when prepared instructional materials include shared experiences and responsibilities for classroom learning. Teachers revealed challenges to address the growing students' diversity; how to reduce learning gaps; and how to increase the achievement of all children. (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Acuirre, Zavala, Katanyoutant (2012) described and documented teachers lacked the pedagogical content knowledge through a culturally responsive teaching approach. LELLs English language needs were not embedded in the academic content courses emphasizing the connections among academic content, thinking, and language development. Teachers resistance LELLs challenges with pedagogy and ideology. They were not receptive to supporting academic language for second language learners and integrating cultural, linguistic and social knowledge into lessons.

The literature review identifies strategies that promote social and academic language learning. The study examined the academic success of African American pre-service teachers. How the academic success of the low performing preservice teacher resembles the performance of secondary education students?

The teacher education programs require pre-service teachers to pass all certifications assessments before teacher internship. For example, education majors must pass the General Knowledge exam before being to the College of Education. By the end of their junior year, they must pass the professional and subject area of Florida teacher certification exams. When a student does not meet the requirements, he/she is academically at-risk of not succeeding in school and will not graduate with an education degree. Many of these students lack the English language skills to pass all certifications exams successfully. Therefore, it is important to know how the social and academic language affect their academic success.

Literature review

In today's 21st century, many students come to the university with distinct learning needs that require understanding and specialized instructional strategies. Although every effort has been made to become sensitive to the diverse learning needs of students, these efforts lack understanding of cultural and language differences. In many cases, these students have been exposed to the America's cultural norms, and learning the English language to succeed in school. Unfortunately understanding the culture and exposing students to the English language are not enough for academic success in required college level courses. The alignment of curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessments need based on students' comprehension of academic content through meaningful activities and interactions. The language and content in classrooms require more than cognitive language skills but also student's social language skills. Downer, Sabol, and Homre (2010) found that it takes skillful combinations of explicit instruction, responsive and engaging, with responsive feedback, and verbal engagement directed to ensure students' learning embedded throughout social and academic content learning. Implementing various aspects of instruction and interaction produce student academic gains in literacy, language, and social development. It effectively contributes to closing gaps in performance between low- and high-risk children. The argument that is conceptualizing a system of contextual inputs and developmental outputs aligns social inputs and social development; instructional inputs and academic development constraints through which educational experience may influence development as well as the basic processes that may integrate developmental change.

According to Swain and Coleman (2015), educators must be prepared to integrate social and language development within content areas to meet the social and language needs of all students. They must implement practical and meaningful instructional strategies within their classrooms that encourage and support writing and reading instruction along with social skills. Instructional strategies must integrate academic content such as writing, reading while also fostering the school connection that is evidenced to stimulate students' development, both academically and socially. The approach integration outlines the process to follow to create a college classroom conducive the academic language and social language learning. Short (2013) found schools lack procedures for programs and sustain professional development on sheltered instruction to teachers who teach content to ELLs. Many content area teachers have not had university coursework on second-language acquisition. They lack skills in language and content instruction integration in teacher preparation courses. They face students learning a new language at the same time they are studying core subjects such as reading, writing mathematics, science, and social studies. Teachers can implement the sheltered instruction method that incorporates techniques for making content comprehensible to English learners and develops students' academic English skills. The authors recommended ongoing professional development that includes a combination of face-to-face training, classroom observations and coaching, school-based professional learning communities, and measurement of implementation.

Writing and literacy development are crucial for the academic and social success of students. During the last 25 years, several terms have been used to describe ELLs learning a second language. Many students come to higher education institutions at the speech emergence language level of English language proficiency or "lacking fluency in a second language acquisition but whose ultimate aim is to become proficient in The English language. They need specialized support in connecting oral and written language as they develop social and academic language skills. The crucial element in this process is the successful integration of content (knowledge, skills, and information) with mechanics (conventions, semantics, syntax, formats, and genres, such as how-to books, fairy tales, personal narratives, and poetry) across the spectrum (Meier,2013). Many students lack the initial stage of learning to write well. It provides developmentally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for academic and social growth. The integration of social and academic language will allow students gain accuracy in writing, confidence, motivation, and voice. Fleming, Bangou, and Fellus (2011) qualitative research study revealed despite the extensive investigation and theoretical work stresses functional conceptualizations of language based on social practice. Educators must consider language as a social practice and argue that this tendency can be strengthened through the integration, of course, content as it pertains to functional conceptions of language with the practicum experience.

Educators are confused with students' ability to interact socially with their peers but struggle academically in content courses. It requires an understanding of the terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). According to Cummins (2001), the student acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge drawn from when students work in another language.

These skills and knowledge provide the base for social and academic language development. It is necessary to the student to students with English language deficiencies bring many challenges of the process and product of content instruction aligned with language instruction for language minority students.

Apedaile and Whitelaw (2012) described a culturally integrated approach to teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) through Roots and Connections. A culturally integrated ESL Curriculum developed to integrate intercultural sensitivity into English-language instruction. It integrates supported community connections and cultural knowledge to provide effective new social integration supports through social language development. The culturally integrated content, process, and instructor supports were intentionally designed to meet social language needs and to develop cultural sensitivity among all student. This project demonstrates the effectiveness of EAL programming that explicitly engages the diversity of its learners using intercultural communication processes and supports a culturally integrated approach.

The study found that academic and social language are important contributing factors to the success of students where they have supportive learning environments and proactive personal traits. Faculty can help to LELLs social and academic language development using comprehensible input and scaffolding strategies.

Comprehensible Input

Making instruction comprehensible can be implemented through a variety of instructional delivery methods that may include, but not limited to, the use of visuals, gestures, concrete examples and same ritual and routines of the academic content. It is imperative that the instructor uses various concrete objects, signs, posters, and similar symbolic and specific referents to illustrate meaning. Following are some effective methods and approaches to support social and academic language development: The natural approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983); Content-based Approach; and The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (Chamot & Omalley, (1994). The natural approach helps LELLs develop basic communication skills in the natural way of acquiring a second language. In this method, students learn new vocabulary through experiences and associations with words and implement words in a meaningful context. Teachers can extend listening experiences to include physical response activities, use of vivid pictures to illustrate concepts, and active involvement of LELLs through physical contact with images, objects, being discussed using choice making, yes or no responses and games. The natural approach implemented through group discussions where students debate the meaning of a concept, the who, what, where, and why of the concept and how the problem can be solved. This approach can complement the traditional lecture format and provide an efficient way to check for comprehension. Heads together is another strategy that requires comprehension input. The teacher selects a team to put their heads together to define a concept, find a solution, or develop a process. The language learning/writing reflection logs approach is a strategy that uses individual language logs to document students' reactions to issues, concepts, readings, and lessons. The LELLs receive new information for teaching language development skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The communication cycle begins with the students' prior background knowledge and experiences which become the subject of the social language and academic content learning assignments. The LELLs are provided with a question or prompt to respond by demonstrating an understanding of the academic content. They restate the main concept, recommend new concepts and details and add their personal reactions, recall experiences or record thoughts. Another strategy to ensure comprehensible input or output is talking before thinking. Talking before thinking requires the student to brainstorm concepts to help team members focus on the topic for investigating or writing. Team members take a number and waits for the teacher to call the number. Once the teacher calls the number, the team member must talk about the concept, tell what they know about it, what they would like to find out about it and what they want to learn.

The CALLA helps in the transition from language development in which content is made comprehensible through the use of strategies to the academic content by teaching LELLs how to understand content area material with success. It also helps LELLs understand and retain academic content material while they are improving their language skills.

Comprehension is a complex cognitive process that students do not see without a clear description of the role social and academic language development and literacy play in the understanding of academic content. It is an active process that requires an intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the content. The mainstream teacher can more effectively support the academic language development of LELLs if they provide academic content that requires an understanding of the main ideas, the content specific vocabulary, and the sentence structures related to competencies.

Vocabulary instruction can be used as a basis for developing academic language in the content area. The content-based approach allows LELLs opportunities to practice the new language while reading, writing, speaking, and listening to it. When academic content teachers include language strategies, LELLs can make the connection between what they learn and what language they use in the content classroom. This collaboration between teachers increases the number of time LELLs spend on content related information and promotes coordinated instruction for them. When we understand that LELLs have two jobs in the classroom, we realize the work that LELLs are doing is not only time-consuming but also frustrating. It is easy for LELLs to get discouraged with their apparent lack of progress when they compare themselves to their native English-speaking peers. Helping LELLs keep portfolios of their work over the semester help them assess their progress at regular intervals. They can see monitor their progress, although they may not yet have met the language proficiency level of their native English-speaking peers. They make real advances in both language acquisition and content learning (Maletz, 2010). As the population of LELLs increases in classrooms, content teachers need to find a starting point for understanding the social and academic learning needs of LELLs in their classrooms. Three key issues for working with LELLs that can provide that point of departure and provide direction are: (1) consider the amount of time required for English language proficiency; (2) English language level of competence; and (3) the use of multiple modes of input and output. Understanding these issues can assist in the search for more information on effective practices for teaching LELLs in academic content courses. Such understanding also encourages teachers to integrate their current knowledge and practice into designing effective instruction for LELLs.

Although the above approaches make academic content comprehensible, it imperative for students to develop high order thinking skills and coping strategies to their academic and personal development. LELLs will need additional reflective practice to improve their processing and production of academic content materials. Teachers can identify, build and enrich those skills and knowledge of already mastered content. Learning strategies can support comprehension, reading, and writing and develop significant comprehensible input. When teachers implement various language development skills, it protects the academic content to ensure that LELLs master academic content. Students learn rigorous academic content materials in a language relevant to student needs. Calderon, Slavin & Sanchez found English learners have various language levels and skills, secondary education. The authors asserted that the quality of instruction is what matters most in educating LELLs. The integration of language, literacy, and content instruction will improve social and academic language development through such strategies as cooperative learning. Therefore, educators need specialized strategies to make the content comprehensible. When educators understand the unique linguistic needs of the LELLs, they can undertake a particular effort to make lessons comprehensible through a variety of means. Most academic content is culture bound. Teachers must use instructional strategies to activate prior background knowledge or build background information into the academic content to assist students in understanding the academic content.

According to Anthony and Beckman (2008), language development or output, is not merely a product to demonstrate learning the language but part of the learning process. The output hypothesis, a theoretical model of second-language acquisition, proposes that second-language learners must produce the language they are learning and understand the language they are producing to obtain a level of English proficiency similar to native English speakers. Comprehensible input places emphasis on moving beyond providing input for LELLs and intentionally targeting language development. The implementation of systemic education rigor and relevance examines curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Comprehensible input requires students' four different types of learning experiences. Instructors must have a framework in place that encourages movement from one component to another learning experiences with the higher level of rigor and relevance (Carrier, 2005). The four different types of learning experiences are assimilation, adaptation, acquisition, and application. Acquisition focuses on recalling information or discovery of basic knowledge. Application experiences provide students opportunities to apply knowledge, skills, and real-world problems. These are skills acquired through Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). Assimilation experiences are often complex and require students to devise solutions frequently which can lead to deeper understanding of concepts and knowledge. Teachers can implement adaptation experiences high in rigor and relevance and require unique solutions, often unpredictable (Cummins 2001). According to Tuncay (2014), teacher strategies are all the ways or procedures a teacher uses to facilitate, help, guide, and coordinate student learning.

Teachers can ensure that learning takes place for LELLs by the following: (1) improve language competence by observing, listening and speaking, (2) understand authentic language and culture, (3) increase fluency through integrated writing skills, (4) practice and experience the English language for various functions and purposes, (5) learn vocabulary through authentic expressions, (6) use artificial and natural language and (7) use the language in different interactional settings using various social exchanges.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding presents various strategies to ensure that LELLs have access to a rigorous and relevant content. Pawan (2008) defined scaffolding as a method to provide content-area teachers with effective methods to integrate language instruction into academic content instruction for English language learners (ELLs). The discoveries identified linguistic, conceptual, social and cultural scaffolding as a function of educators' personal and practical knowledge. Also, the findings demonstrated that educators' have limited cultural and language knowledge of scaffolding strategies. The findings have an impact on the nature of ELL instruction and its effectiveness. Second language acquisition and theoretical sociocultural perspectives show that referential questions are important for learning, but also that they can be difficult ELLs to understand and produce answers. Integrating scaffolding functions using various communicative changes engage LELPLs in referential questions. One possible way to address these challenges faced by educators is the use of positive emotional experiences in the classroom. Positive emotional experiences to enhance learning is called, "emotional scaffolding," a term that borrows from Vygotsky's concept of "scaffolding" and combines it with an awareness of the role of emotion in the learning process (Meyer & Turner, 2007).

Emotional scaffolding in the social and academic contexts is significant because of the tremendous potential for improvement in students' learning engagement. LELLs do not necessarily developed complex linguistic competencies to succeed in content areas. Content area teachers can employ instructional strategies to continue scaffolding using the Vygotsky theory of social, academic language demands to support the academic learning of LELLs. The instructional strategies include: wait-time, think-pair-share, context setting, use of visuals/objects (e.g., realia), modeling, and the use of small cooperative learning groups and structured dialog). These strategies help solidify the content comprehensible to ELLs as well as more accessible to all students. A university-wide secondary credential program engaged in systemic reform through professional development for content faculty to better equip prospective preservice teacher candidates for supporting the academic and social needs of LELLs, particularly in urban schools. When faculty across disciplines and colleges enhanced their beliefs, knowledge, and confidence concerning how LELLs acquire social and academic English language, they can implement effective ESOL methods and strategies. The university faculty participation is structured, and purposeful professional development to strengthen their preparation of prospective preservice content prospective teachers for working with all students, including LELPLs, in diverse classrooms.

Conclusion

As the population of LELLs increases in HEIs' classrooms, academic content teachers will need to find a starting point for understanding and meeting the English language needs of ELLs in their classrooms. Integrating social and academic language in content areas can assist in the search for more effective practices for teaching LELLs in content classrooms. Such process encourages teachers to examine and integrates their current knowledge and practice into designing effective instruction for ELLs. Also, academic content teachers will need to make language modifications to provide a base for working with LELLs whether it is social or academic setting. The implementation of deliberate language forms, skills, and strategies to support the process of language development and learning concepts will only improve the social and academic language proficiency of LELLs. The dangers of subtractive social and academic language for LELLs in HEIs are obviously not so strong as for children of immigrants to the USA. Nevertheless, we should do all we can to demonstrate to LELLs that their cultures and languages are equal as valid and valued as the Anglo. Interesting enough, social and academic integration for LELLs in college courses establish an efficient process for faculty to use in teaching academic content. The social and academic language integration is a collection of best instructional practices and dispositions strategically implemented to maximize LELLs learning in college classrooms. Social and academic language integration employ ESOL strategies to allow for LELLs engagement, questioning, reflecting, flexible grouping and alternative assessments.

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