

Educating English Language Learners
The Literacy Gap in the Underachieving Demographic

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Abstract

With the recent rise in immigration, the demographics of the American classroom are changing. English Language Learners are becoming more common, and with this change comes the challenge of effectively educating them. Unfortunately, this demographic has been observed to have a major achievement gap, as many students are placed in mainstream classrooms without basic literacy skills. This gap can be bridged through intentional focus on literacy with these students. This thesis examines styles of education for English Language Learners and instructional strategies in an effort to identify which styles and strategies can bridge the literacy and achievement gap most effectively.

Educating English Language Learners

The Literacy Gap in the Underachieving Demographic

The American educational system is set apart from many educational systems around the world for its intentionality in reaching every student. Educators across America agree that every student deserves differentiated instruction to help him or her reach his or her fullest potential, and when a student underachieves, educators must make adjustments are to help him or her improve and get up to pace with his or her classmates. However, an entire demographic is slipping through the cracks, and few are effectively meeting the needs of this demographic. One of the largest demographics of the American classroom is also the demographic with the largest achievement gap. English Language Learners (ELLs) are the students who are entering American classrooms with little knowledge of the language of instruction. ELLs are defined as students who receive or are eligible to receive special services because English is not their first language (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 10). They make up one of the largest and fastest growing demographics in the American classroom (Flynn & Hill, 2005, p. 1), and as a demographic they have a large achievement gap between them and their English-native peers (National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, 2010, p. 17). ELLs are the demographic that is not being reached.

The Rising Number of English Language Learners in the American Classroom

The numbers are staggering. One in every nine students in classrooms in the United States is an ELL, and these students represent over 400 languages (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 10). The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition reported that the demographic has grown by almost 2 million over the past decade, a 51% increase (as

cited in “English-language learners,” 2011). With an annual growth rate of 10% (Ortiz, 2009) this group of students is expected to reach 40% of the classroom population by the 2030s (Thomas, 2001). States such as South Carolina, Arkansas, Indiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia are going to be particularly impacted by this growth, as they are the states that are seeing the most growth in the Hispanic population (Ortiz). What is problematic about this growth? ELLs are not achieving on the same level as their peers (National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, 2010, p. 17), and as their prevalence continues to grow they will continue to make up a higher percentage of the student population in American classrooms.

The Achievement Gap

Contrary to what may be commonly believed, many ELLs are born in the U.S (Goldenberg, 2008). Therefore, these students have only ever attended the American school system. However, they are nowhere near the achievement level of their peers (National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, 2010, p. 17). As Calderon, Slavin, and Sanchez (2011) expressed:

These students, who have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten, are still classified as limited English proficient when they reach middle or high school—suggesting strongly that preschool and elementary programs are not adequately addressing the needs of English learners. (p. 104)

For the majority of ELL’s who have only ever known American schools, the responsibility falls solely on the American educational system to properly educate these students.

The achievement gap between ELLs and native English students is large. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, fourth grade ELLs scored 36 points lower than their peers on the reading section of the test and 25 points below their peers in math. The results in eighth grade were worse with a difference of 42 points in reading and 37 points in math (Goldenberg, 2008). Scoring lower in upper grades is a trend among many studies done on the achievement of ELLs, indicating that instead of improving with extended exposure to the English language, there is actually some kind of breakdown in the educational process of these students. Steve Drummond (2007) discovered this trend in an analysis of scores on The National Assessment of Educational Progress. When comparing the achievement gap in reading scores between Latino students and their English native classmates, he found that the gap was the most narrow in fourth grade, but from that point on it progressively widened as students moved through school. The responsibility for this breakdown falls on the American educational system. In reality, 85% of ELL students actually begin kindergarten in America and are failing to succeed in school (Ortiz, 2011). Simply put, the American educational system has failed ELLs and left them with a gap that is impossible to bridge on their own.

A Call to Bridge the Gap

Suggested reasons for the existence of the gap are broad. Some, such as Macswan (2000) would argue that this problem is linked to an undefined ethnocentrism possessed by Americans, including educators. Others, such as the Center for Education Policy (2007) would say it is linked to a lack of funding (p. 1). An even greater population, such as the Master Teacher (2010) would assert that it is due to lack of research or training to

teach this demographic (p. 1). All of the following likely have played a role over the years, but regardless the reason for the gap, educators must begin to build bridges over it.

In 1978, efforts were made to begin to bridge this gap in the court case of *Casteñeda v. Pickard*. In this United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit case, a Mexican-American father, Roy Casteñeda, claimed that his children's school was discriminating against them and failing to provide them with adequate bilingual education to prepare them to participate in the mainstream classroom. The result of the case was *The Equal Opportunities Act of 1974*, which established a three-part criterion for schools in educating ELLs. The criteria were as follows:

- The bilingual education program must be “based on sound educational theory.”
- The program must be “implemented effectively with resources for personnel, instruction materials, and space.”
- After a trial period, the program must be proven effective in overcoming language barriers/ handicaps. (*Casteñeda v. Pickard*, 1978)

Unfortunately, due to the current achievement gap, it is apparent that the programs in many schools today still do not live up to these standards as they ignore recent research on the topic, and there is clearly a lack of effectiveness in their current strategies.

In recent times, legislation and educational standards committees are still addressing the issue of better educating ELLs and are placing similar demands on school systems, but the gap continues to remain. In 2002, the George Bush administration passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation with bipartisan support. NCLB was passed to address achievement gaps of all types for all learners in American public schools.

According to Harper and DeJong (2009), one of the major focuses of NCLB is minority groups, one of which is ELLs (p. 140). Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, each state must create and meet criteria for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in all students, including the sub-groups (Accountability for Adequate Yearly Progress). Though ELLs are a major subgroup of AYP, the achievement gap still remains.

Dr. Wayne E. Wright of the University of Texas and San Antonio led a discussion that claimed that the problems with the NCLB standards for ELLs are both the instability of the ELL subgroup and the problem with testing accommodations for ELLs. The ELL subgroup is so unstable because as soon as a student is near English proficiency, he or she is moved into the mainstream and no longer reflective of the ELL population in standardized testing, leaving the ELL subgroup to consistently have low performing students due to their lack of fluency in the English language.

Testing accommodations are also a major concern because while students may know the content, they often have trouble with comprehending the English standardized test. Other issues with NCLB include a standardization of content for students who have very diverse needs, and a lack of extended focus on literacy for ELLs. While the intentions were good with the reform of NCLB, it is possible that in standardizing education for ELLs the gap has been widened instead of bridged.

In more current educational initiative, the Common Core Standards also address ELLs. The Common Core Standards are a set of national English and Mathematics standards that were created in 2010 for the purpose of a more consistent standard set to prepare American students to “compete successfully in the global economy” (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2011). The Common Core put out a document to address the

expectations for ELLs under its mandates: ELLs are expected to meet all grade level standards. Yet the document offers little rationale of how they are to obtain the English proficiency to meet these standards. It merely insists that ELLs may need more time in certain areas (“Application of Common Core Standards for English Language Learners”). There seems to be a trend in many legislators and leading educational policy leaders advocating for achievement among ELLs, but none seem to offer the means to bridge the gap. There still seems to be a disconnection between what standards are proposing and what standardized testing is revealing. Educators and researchers must continue to press forward on this issue. Many are advocating for the improvement in the educational approaches of ELLs, but very few have effectively stated *how* to do this. All members of the educational realm should pay greater attention to current research on ELLs and begin to develop ways to apply the research in each individual classroom because the gap must be bridged.

Why Literacy Is the Bridge Over the Gap

Literacy, or one’s ability to read and write, is crucial for every student in the American classroom. It is how the Western society learns, processes information, and communicates. While all students begin school with different levels of literacy, many having little background in literacy, most every native English-speaking student has obtained oral proficiency in English, which aids him or her in developing into a literate student. ELLs do not have this privilege, and as a result the focus of their education becomes oral proficiency and not literacy. Researchers have reported that it takes up to five years for ELLs to reach the level of fluency required for literacy to develop (Riches & Genesse, 2006). Taking this into account, Thomas and Collier (2001) asserted that on

average ELL programs only last between two and three years, meaning that a large majority of ELLs are placed the mainstream classroom while still being non-literates (p. 8). It is likely that this accounts for the decreasing scores as students progress through school. They are illiterate and as the rigor of the material increases, so does their frustration with the written English language.

With a focus on literacy throughout the education of ELLs, many could obtain literacy at a much faster rate and in turn retain the content better. Literacy is the bridge to the achievement gap. It is a tangible and obtainable goal for these students that could change their educational future, and ultimately their lives. Much research has been done on how to better educate ELLs in light of obtaining literacy. This research takes into account the issue of transfer, the language of instruction, the style of education, and the available instructional approaches. There is much to be examined in all of the aforementioned areas, but the focus must remain on literacy in order for ELLs to be successful.

The Value of a Fully Developed L1

Before examining the details of what the education of an ELL should look like, it is of great importance to look at the foundational theories on how ELLs learn a second language. Many of the findings suggest a strong connection between a student's L1 (native language) proficiency and L2 (second language) acquisition.

The Threshold Hypothesis and Other Research on Language and Cognition

Jim Cummins was one of the pioneers in the field of researching the acquisition of a second language. He developed two theories that have been foundational in what is known to be true about the English Language Learner. The first of the two theories is the

threshold hypothesis. For the sake of focusing on literacy, the hypothesis at its core asserts that if a child's L1 is terminated altogether before he is fully developed in the sphere of cognition, both his or her L1 and L2 will always be hindered, therefore making literacy a distant goal. According to Cummins (1979), "The threshold hypothesis assumes that those aspects of bilingualism which might positively influence cognitive growth are unlikely to come into effect until the child has attained a certain minimum or threshold level of competence in a second language" (p. 229). Similarly, Cummins argued that there are levels of competence that a student must obtain in both the L1 and the L2 in order to avoid cognitive disadvantages (p. 228). Ovando (2003) affirmed the same concept this way, "Research shows that if cognitive development is discontinued in a child's first language, they may never reach proficiency in the second language" (p. 15). Unfortunately, this is becoming a very common problem and has been for a number of years. In *Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood*, Richard Rodriguez (1982) tells his story of learning English at a young age and how through the struggle he lost his knowledge of his L1. In this account it seems as though Rodriguez was not cognitively developed in his L1 when he was immersed in English and as a result he struggled to learn English and in the end he completely lost all knowledge of his L1 and arguably suffered cognitive consequences for it. Though Rodriguez asserted that it was necessary for him to give up his L1 to gain an L2, many would not consider this to be a positive trade because of the subtractive form of L2 acquisition. The reality is that many ELLs across America likely believe the same as Rodriguez, sacrificing their L1 and possibly some cognitive benefits as well.

Cummins (1979) believes that there seems to be two thresholds to his theory: the first level is that of avoiding cognitive defects from bilingualism and the second is that of promoting cognitive growth (p. 230). Ovando (2003) agrees with Cummins so strongly that he opposes the common belief that younger children can learn languages most easily in claiming that students between ages 9 and 25 are more likely to master a second language in all areas except pronunciation because they have reached full cognitive development. According to the work of these two theorists, the foremost goal in literacy education should be getting students to the first threshold in their L1 in order to avoid any cognitive defects. A second goal should be using bilingualism to help them reach the second threshold of actual cognitive acceleration and benefits.

The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis

The Developmental Interdependence hypothesis is also one of Cummins' theories, and one of the most tested and applied theories in all of bilingual education. In the words of Cummins (1979) the theory suggests, "...that the level of L2 competence which a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins" (p. 233). This proposition of the connection between L1 mastery and L2 mastery has been proved time and time again. Guerra (1983) did a trial and found this even to be true in adults. He noticed that one's academic skill in his or her L1 seemed to predict the subject's ability to correct errors in the L2 when he or she was shown examples of syntactic errors. Ramirez (1987) conducted a three-year longitudinal observation from 1982-1984 of bilingual education students in three schools in Newark, New Jersey and confirmed Cummins's hypothesis to through an analysis of student achievement over an extended period of time

(p. 84). On a more focused level, Hudelson (1987) connected this essential theory to literacy in saying that developing L1 literacy in a child's native language prior to educating them in an L2, "develops in children an understanding of what reading and writing are for and provides children with resources to use as they move into second language reading and writing" (as cited in Wojtowicz, 2006). This theory that L1 competence must precede L2 exposure leads one to question if knowledge from one's L1 is transferred into one's L2, and if this is the case transfer can be used to the benefit of ELLs in the classroom.

The Issue of Transfer

On the topic of transfer, one must first remember that every student who enters the classroom has a unique background. Students all have some type of language skills, a distinct cultural background, their own prior knowledge and experiences. August and Shanahan (2006) put it best when they said, "Language minority students are not blank slates" (p. 5). Every student brings something to the table and this could be of great aid or great harm when it comes to L2 acquisition. The Contrastive Analysis hypothesis addresses this concept in claiming that students will struggle in learning things that differ from their L2, but will be aided by the similarities (Riches, 2006, p. 66). While it is known that both the positive and negative of one's L1 transfer to one's L2, the majority of research is in what transfers positively. The focus in this section is on transfer as it pertains to literacy.

The Transfer of L1 Oral Proficiency to L2 Literacy

The connection between oral proficiency in either language and literacy is somewhat difficult to gauge. Literacy requires a grasp on academic language, but oral

proficiency does not; therefore, it is often hard to see the transfer connections. However, students primarily learn oral conversational skills first in both their L1 and their L2.

Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship despite the difference in conversational language and academic language. Riches and Genesse (2006) reported that the level of L1 language use at home usually gave no indication of L2 literacy (p. 68). However, they did find one connection that transferred. They discovered that L2 literacy could develop well even if L2 oral proficiency were limited as long as one is proficient orally in her L1. As they put it, the L1 “fills in the gaps” (p. 70) where the L2 is lacking. While there is little connection between L1 oral and L2 literacy transfer, clearly L1 oral proficiency is a pre-requisite for L2 literacy.

The Transfer of L2 Oral Proficiency to L2 Literacy

Though a difference still exists in oral proficiency and the academic language required for literacy, greater connections exist between L2 oral proficiency and L2 literacy because oral proficiency is a good gauge of emerging fluency and knowledge of vocabulary that is necessary for literacy. However, as previously mentioned, a student’s writing performance in the L2 can often exceed the student’s oral performance in the L2 (Riches, 2006, p. 69). While this fact is true, much research has supported L2 oral transfer. Lindholm and Aclan (1991) conducted a test on the threshold hypothesis where they tested levels of bilingual proficiency and discovered that L2 oral proficiency could have great influence on L2 literacy. Much research on this specific transfer drew conclusions on vocabulary. Saville-Troike (1984) argued that a well-developed L2 vocabulary was crucial for ELL instruction and was of great aide to literacy (p. 216). Along the same lines, Peregoy (1989) concluded that a lacking L2 vocabulary hindered

reading comprehension. Breadth of L2 vocabulary was realized to be a particular hindrance to students with a lower mastery of the English language. These conclusions were made by testing six Mexican-American fifth graders, each with various levels of English proficiency in various aspects of comprehension. What the research offers in regard to transfer between oral achievement and literacy is complex and limited, but one can conclude that oral proficiency in both the L1 and the L2 aide literacy in the L2, no matter how small of a difference it may make.

The Transfer of L1 Literacy to L2 Literacy

The transfer between L1 literacy and L2 literacy is vast. Researchers such as Riches (2006) have found unquestionably that literacy skills transfer from one's L1 into one's L2 (pp. 77-78). It is much easier for a student to develop these skills in a language that he or she is familiar with and transfer them to a less familiar language, than to try to develop them in a language in which he or she already struggles. Some of these skills may include phonological awareness, text skills, decoding, summarizing, predicting, drawing on prior knowledge, and more. Riches (2006) agreed that these types of skills could transfer and wrote, "When one has learned to read, there are many components of reading that can be transferred into learning to read another language" (p. 66). Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, and Golderberg (2000) were in union with this, claiming that the students who could read best in their L1 were able to transition into reading English at a much higher pace, and that ultimately any time spent on literacy development regardless of language was time well spent. In their study of eight successful bilingual Latino students, three monolingual English natives, and three struggling bilingual Latino students, Jimenez, Garcia, and Pearson (1996) took it a step further and actually

discovered that a student who was unsuccessful at using literary skills in one language would be unsuccessful in both languages (p. 105). Similarly, Collier (1987) determined that older elementary students who received at least two years of L1 reading instruction developed their English on grade level much more rapidly than students who received no L1 instruction in reading (p. 637). Knowing that this type of transfer does take place, there is a lot of research about what transfers in particular aspects of literacy.

One of the most crucial areas of literacy development and one of the largest areas of transfer is phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is, “The ability to identify and manipulate phonemes, onsets and rimes, and syllables” (Tompkins, 2009, p. 433). The most basic element of phonological awareness is the ability to hear individual sounds and recognize them. Durgunoglu, Nagy, and Hancin Bhatt (1993) asserted that there was a correlation across languages in the ability to hear small components of languages. According to Riches (2006), no study has ever disproven the transfer of phonological awareness (p. 74). It is a skill that is not tied to word meaning, but word manipulation and that skill can be applied to other languages.

An area of greater question and critique when it comes to transfer is the skill of spelling and orthography. This is a challenging aspect of the English language to begin with. The biggest question that is asked on this topic is whether students try and apply spelling rules from their L1 to their L2, therefore making mistakes. Fashola, Drum, Mayer, and Kang (1996) found this to be the case when monitoring Spanish natives as they used common Spanish rules on similar English words. Tompkins, Ambramson, and Pritchard (1999) found the opposite to be true, however. They analyzed student journal entries of 60 third and fourth grade ELLs from five different L1 backgrounds and did not

find the same correlation as other researchers found among student errors. They instead found that all ELLs, no matter the L1 language background, made similar errors, suggesting that there was no negative transfer of spelling rules from the students' L1. It was suggested that students might have avoided words they did not know how to spell though (pp. 13-15). Another potential issue that can arise with spelling is in conjugation mistakes of various verb endings. Though there may be a tendency for negative transfer in spelling, it can be easily reversed if noticed and addressed quickly.

Cognate vocabulary is an obvious transfer that often takes place in literacy. Students can use their L1 vocabulary knowledge to decode a word in their L2 that they are unfamiliar with. Though this only applies to some languages, it is particularly helpful to students.

There are numerous other literacy strategies that are prone to transfer. Some examples are prediction, summarization, making inferences, and using prior knowledge to understand the story. Successful ELLs often make use of many of these strategies. Riches (2006) expressed it well when he wrote that ELLs possess, "a common underlying reservoir of literacy abilities" (p. 77). These abilities can be drawn upon even in their L2. However, unsuccessful students often fail to use these strategies. As Jimenez et al. (1996) wrote, ELLs do not make inferences nor properly adjust them, the prior knowledge they focus on is irrelevant and unrelated, and they focus on completing the reading rather than understanding it (p. 105). If students do not master strategies before shifting them into their second language, they will have even greater trouble with the use of the strategies in their L2. Ultimately, literacy skills are not bound to a particular language and therefore should be mastered before they are of benefit in a student's L2. Mastery often

must first occur in the language that the student is most comfortable with, which leads to the issue of language of instruction.

Language of Instruction

Much was implied in the previous section about the positive transfer that can come when a student is educated in his or her L1 prior to learning to read in his or her L2. When discussing language of instruction, Goldenberg (2008) echoed this in a reflection of his research by arguing that “teaching children to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English” (p 14). While much support has shown this to be true, it is important to look at what those with other views say as well.

The Time on Task View

Those who oppose educating a student in their L1, by default advocate for English only education for ELLs. One of the major arguments made by those who hold the view that English only education is the best way to educate ELLs is the time on task view. The time on task view claims that the more time spent on a task, the better developed it will come (Genesse, 2006, p. 126). Many therefore claim that students should only be educated in English because the more time students spend being taught in English, the better their English will become. Proponents of this view argue that all other time spent instructing in another language is a waste of time and resources. Supporters of time on task would discredit all research on positive transfer and the value of a fully developed L1, and simply assert that more time spent hearing English leads to higher fluency in English. Many times this view is paired with prescriptivism, the idea that some languages are of higher value than others (Macswan, 2000). While it may be arguable that there is

great benefit in exposure to the L2, there is greater support for an understanding of strategies to be able to understand and use the L2.

Educating Learners in Their L1 Initially

Many who do not agree with the time on task view are advocates for bilingual education of some type. They believe in educating ELLs in their L1 before or while simultaneously teaching them English. After much research, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth came to the conclusion that bilingual education had “an edge” over solely educating students in English (August & Shanahan, 2006). As previously established, those who support L1 education do so because of the proof that literacy is facilitated when students can learn skills in their L1 and then transfer them to their L2.

Many studies have been performed to demonstrate that students initially educated in their native language outperform their ELL peers who receive only English instruction in the area of literacy. One of the best-conducted studies on this topic was the Maldonado (1994) study. It randomly assigned a total of forty ELLs with disabilities to either a bilingual or English only special education classroom. The two classes were taught for three years. The curriculum and instruction were the same; the only difference was the language of instruction. The bilingual class received almost all Spanish instruction the first year, an even combination of Spanish and English the second year, and all English the third year. At the end of three years, the students were tested, and the bilingual group far exceeded the English only group. Similarly, Howard et al. (2004) led a longitudinal study on the same topic with Latino ELLs and English natives who were in two-way immersion programs (bilingual programs that have both English natives and ELL’s in the

same classroom with instruction 50% in English and 50% in the other language) from grades three to five. The results concluded that both the ELLs and the English L1 students showed great improvements in English reading and writing. Finally, Burnham-Massey and Piña (1990) compared Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) reading and language test scores from grades one to twelve of ELLs who began their instruction in Spanish and native English students. After a consistent increase in the scores of these students from first to fifth grade, the students were scoring equal with their English peers by seventh and eighth grade. This kind of result is unheard of for ESL students who only receive education in English. The research weighs highly in favor of educating ELLs in a bilingual manner, using their native language for primary instruction and gradually transitioning to English. This is particularly supported in the area of literacy.

Types of Education for ELLs

The second big debate involving ELLs is over the best approach for educating them. There are no national regulations for how to educate ELLs. For this reason, the types of education offered to ELLs across the nation are almost as numerous as the schools across the nation. According to Goldenberg (2008), about 60% of all students who are ELLs receive services that are completely English based. This includes the 12% of ELLs who receive no support and are in English mainstream classes and the nearly 50% that receive all English instruction through some type of additional service. Some examples of these services are aides, resource teachers that pull students out of class for extra assistance, or specific instruction via ESL curriculum. The other 40% of ELLs are in some type of program that uses their native language, often some type of bilingual

education program (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 10). With literacy in mind, the question that arises is that of which program best equips students as literate learners.

ESL Pullout and Other English-only Methods

English-only services vary in style, but usually consist of a student being submerged in the mainstream classroom the majority of the day and pulled out for a short period of time (thirty minutes to an hour) for special small group assistance. However, even in these small groups, English is the only language of instruction. It is a sink or swim approach, which can be dangerous for young learners who have not mastered reading in their primary language, much less a second language. This structure is, however, the most resourceful and cost effective strategy for schools to take.

Many schools limit their services for ELLs to English-only methods, and much of the public is in support of that. From 1998-2002 voters in Arizona, California, and Massachusetts all voted to remove bilingual education from their states (“English-Language learners,” 2011). However, this is going against all methodology the research suggests is best. Wojtowicz (2006) found that ELLs who were immersed in the English mainstream showed significant decreases in reading and math achievement by fifth grade. The difference was almost three-fourths of a standard deviation compared to students who received some form of bilingual education. Though the evidence is against English-only models, many schools today are still choosing this option over the others.

Bilingual Education

It is becoming apparent that bilingual education is the educational structure that is going to be most effective in closing the achievement gap. According to Greene (1998), students in bilingual education programs are getting about three extra months of learning

in a two-year period when compared to their peers in English-only programs. That “three extra months” can have significant benefits in closing in the achievement gap. However, bilingual education has more than one style. There are many different variations of bilingual education.

Transitional Bilingual Education. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) is also known as Early-Exit Bilingual Education. This is because it is the shortest in duration of bilingual programs. According to Medina (1995), TBE only uses a child’s native language until he or she learns functional English. Usually instruction of literacy and content areas are done through the child’s L1 and English instruction is for the sake of oral development. Often non-core subjects such as art or PE are also taught in English. As students begin to comprehend English, there is a gradual shift from the student’s L1 to English. When students are fairly proficient in English, they are sent into the mainstream classroom. Genesse (1999) points out that the aim for TBE is not bilingualism (p. 20). For this reason, this would be considered a subtractive form of bilingual education (replacing one language with another), which many researchers would consider to be detrimental cognition and language development, as well as other areas such as culture and heritage.

Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) is one of the more popular bilingual education structures today. President Obama actually endorsed it in his 2008 presidential campaign. He has not restated this view since that time, however (English-language learners, 2011). TBE also has been recorded to have some long-term success. According to Thomas and Collier (2001), 50-50 Transitional Bilingual Education students, who began education 50% in their L1, reached the 45th percentile among their peers by the

11th grade. Transitional Bilingual Educational students that began education 90% in their L1, reached the 40th percentile by the end of fifth grade. While TBE clearly is successful in some ways, it would be good to consider other options for additive bilingual education when resources allow.

Developmental Bilingual Education. Developmental Bilingual Education (DBE) is known as late exit bilingual education. It educates ELLs in both their L1 and English. The program still only includes ELLs. Genesse (1999) claimed that DBE will last for as many grades as a school can fund (p. 24). The goal is to promote full proficiency in a student's first language as well as English. In this way, it is an additive form of bilingual education as English is being added to a mastered L1 (Genesse). This system allows students to achieve the higher level of cognition referred to in Cummins' threshold hypothesis.

The successes of Developmental Bilingual Education have been vast. When Thomas and Collier (2001) studied DBE they observed that 50-50 DBE students reached the 72nd percentile after just four years of bilingual schooling, and they maintained this, as by seventh grade they were still at the 61st percentile, in the upper half of their peers. Developmental Bilingual Education is an excellent system for schools to consider.

Two Way Immersion. The primary difference between Two Way Immersion (TWI) and the other forms of bilingual education is that half of a Two Way Immersion class is made up of English natives. The class is taught 50% in English and 50% in another language, which is the L1 of the other half of the class. Generally, these programs begin in Kindergarten and last until the end of elementary school. TWI is a way to develop bilingualism in all students. In the words of Genesse (1999), "As students and

teachers interact socially and work together to perform academic tasks, the students' language abilities are developed along with their knowledge of academic subject matter" (p. 36). He also pointed out that this is an additive bilingual environment, not just for ELLs, but for English natives as well (Genesse, p. 36).

While TWI is still an uncommon environment in American schools, it is increasing in popularity. In May of 2005, more than 300 schools across the nation had this program with 94% of them being Spanish-English programs (Bae, 2007, p. 302). Through these TWI programs both ELLs and native English speakers develop an edge over their classmates upon exiting these bilingual programs. Bae (2007) argued that TWI has conditions superior to other programs, specifically, the opportunity that the two groups of learners have to interact with each other (p. 301). This interaction allows the students to learn from one another and in this set-up no group is superior to the other as they are both striving to learn a new language. TWI is an effective way to create a community of learning and encouragement that is often difficult to create in any other program for ELLs.

The research supports TWI not only to be a good environment, but statistically the most effective one. Thomas and Collier (2001) conducted a research project on the eight major types of programs for ELLs collecting data on a total of 210,054 students in five various school districts (each with a different type of program) across the United States. They found that in a high poverty school 58% of students who were former ELLs that were in a TWI program met or exceeded the Oregon state standards in reading by the end of the third and fifth grades. A similar test concluded that ELLs in the Two Way Immersion program outperformed their peer comparison groups in Transitional Bilingual

Education and Developmental Bilingual Education. For the native English speakers in these programs, they discovered that they maintained their English, mastered a second language, and scored far above the 50th percentile in all of their tests, outscoring their English native peers in every area (p. 5). Not only is TWI bringing ELLs up to speed in a way that exceeds all other programs, but also it is giving English natives an edge that is becoming crucial in the changing society that we live in.

Conclusions on Types of Education

Each of the aforementioned programs have their benefits, even ESL pull out programs. However, the benefits are not always in the students' best interests. When schools choose financial or resourceful benefits over the betterment of each individual student, the achievement gap continues to grow and the educational system continues to fail this demographic. In the research of Thomas and Collier (2001), they summarized their findings with a few simple points. They asserted that Developmental Bilingual Education and Two Way Bilingual Immersion are the only programs that truly help students become literate enough to reach the 50th percentile and maintain that level are Developmental Bilingual Education and Two Way Bilingual Education. This is because students with ELLs *cannot* be put in short term programs and reach the level they need to (p.8). The reality is, whatever program a school chooses to use must ensure that a student masters literacy in his or her L1 first and is in the program long enough to develop grade-level fluency.

An Effective Model

Though many states such as Arizona, California, and Massachusetts ("English-Language learners," 2011) have passed recent legislation against what the research is

saying, other states are starting to take steps towards closing the gap. Illinois is one of those states. As mentioned earlier, many ELLs are born in the United States. Taking notice of this, Illinois decided that starting early with these students is going to give them an edge in closing the gap on down the line. Their approach to this is to be the first state to mandate that public schools offer bilingual education programs to preschoolers (Malone, 2010). If there is a certain number of students in a school of the same language background, the school must offer a bilingual class that teaches all of their content in their L1 and begins to slowly teach them English (Malone). In doing this, they continue to develop cognition in the students' L1 while beginning the English process on simply a conversational level. As this is carried into Kindergarten, these students can become literate in their L1; when they reach a point of literacy in their L1 their English skills are far enough along to begin teaching them literacy skills in English as well. Eugene Garcia, former chair of the National Task Force for the Early Education of Hispanics said, "If you start early, there's a very good promise that you will not have achievement gap issues later on" (as cited in Malone). As states like Illinois take steps toward closing the gap, there is promise for the nation's ELLs and a model for other states and school districts to follow.

Approaching Literacy in Any Classroom

While the pressure lies on those in the administrative positions to change programming for ELLs, there are many in the field of education who do not have the power to make those decisions. However, the job of closing the gap is the responsibility of all in the field of education. Therefore, teachers and others in similar positions should make every effort to apply proper instructional methods to meet the needs of ELLs in their

classrooms. Goldenberg (2008) pointed out that what is known about good instruction and curriculum for mainstream students tends to be true for ELLs as well. In addition to this, it is important to study approaches that work for ELLs specifically, especially in the area of literacy.

Literacy Instructional Styles

There are three main instructional styles for teaching literacy skills to students: (a) direct instruction, (b) interactive instruction, and (c) process instruction. There are benefits in each of these approaches for ELLs, and knowledge of these benefits can help to meet each individual learner's needs on a more effective basis.

Direct instruction. Direct Instruction is when literacy skills are explicitly taught. Many believe that this style of instruction is best for ELLs because they will not pick up on skills as easily on their own (Genesse, 2006, p. 111). Direct Instruction could be done through whole class instruction on a certain skill such as summarizing. It also can involve teacher modeling, working one on one to meet students' individual needs, etc. August said this about direct instruction: "Instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading—identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension—has clear benefits for language-minority students" (2006).

Many studies have been done on direct instruction, but they are all on the direct instruction of different skills. For example, McLaughlin et al. (2000) studied the effects of direct vocabulary instruction. His team discovered that it did help students drastically, but there was still a major achievement gap in this area even after many years. In another study, Kucer (1992) looked at how third grade students could be taught how to use

context clues to decode words. He taught the students to do this by using cloze sentences. At the end of the school year, 93% of the students could respond correctly in the cloze sentences, but when interviewed the students did not understand how to apply this skill to their reading passages. They needed further instruction. This study reveals an important need in direct instruction. Students must be shown how and given the opportunity to apply the skills they learn to their own reading. There is definitely great benefit to direct instruction, but as these studies have revealed it should be supplemented with more active approaches.

Interactive instruction. Interactive instruction involves students learning from each other. In interactive instruction, “learners engage in literacy activities with one or more other learners or one or more other mature readers and writers” (Genesse, 2006, p. 116). There is also value in interactive environments for ELLs because of the practice students get in interacting with other English learners. A good example of interactive instruction is a read-think aloud as the student is getting a model, guided practice, and then individualized practice. It is a highly interactive way of teaching. Interactive instruction could also take place in a group format such as literature circles. Genesse stated that almost every study done on interactive instruction, realized at least some type of benefit for ELLs (p. 118). Saunders and Goldberg (1999) did a test on both interactive instruction and direct instruction. They assessed Latino students in the fourth and fifth grades that were randomly assigned to one of four groups. One group received direct instruction only, another group used only literature logs (a form of interactive instruction), one group used both, and there was a control group. The only group that showed any difference from the control group was the group that used both the literature

logs and received direct instruction, demonstrating value in pairing direct and interactive instruction. This finding makes a very strong case for the pairing of direct instruction and interactive instruction for ELLs.

Process instruction. The final form of instruction that can benefit ELLs is process-based instruction. Process based instruction allows the students to do more teaching themselves by more quality interaction time with texts. Genesse (2006) referred to this as, “students engagement in authentic literacy activities” (p. 121). Children’s literature is a great resource to use for process-based instruction. Children’s magazines could also be a good resource. One must question process instruction for ELLs because it is a lot to expect them to form literacy skills independently when working with texts that they are not overly comfortable with. Kucer and Silva (1999) said this about the topic, “...it is overly simplistic to assert that students will improve their literacy abilities by being immersed in a garden of print” (p. 365). While English Language Learners do need to interact with written materials frequently, this should be done in the context of the two prior approaches, and teachers should also be mindful of the rigor of the text as well as the level of the student. No matter what the instructional style, the most crucial need of all is simply for literacy to be the focus.

Addressing Literacy in the Classroom

For literacy instruction to be effective, it is best to heed to what has been discovered about literacy-based instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) published a list of five essential components of reading and literacy instruction. This study has been so highly recognized that these five components were included into NCLB legislation and many other highly recognized educational documents. The

development of these five literacy skills is an even greater need for learners who are new to a language. Therefore, they should be a central point of instruction for every classroom that has ELLs. These five components are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension.

Phonemic awareness. This first area of reading development is an area that often requires less work than most of the others because a child often learns to manipulate sounds in his or her own language, and then can apply that same skill to English. Nevertheless, there are still some challenges to be aware of in relation to ELLs and phonemic awareness. Antunez (2002) pointed out that many ELLs commonly encounter problems with recognizing and using phonemes that are not present in the student's L1. If a student were struggling with a particular phoneme, it would be helpful to study the phonemes of their L1 and target the root the specific problem. Antunez also suggested that many meaningful activities such as word walls and songs be used for developing phonemic awareness in ELLs. A solid grasp on phonemic awareness prepares ELLs for the next area of reading development: phonics skills.

Phonics skills. An element that ELLs need specific additional instruction in is phonics. No matter what language background an ELL comes from, the phonological system of English is going to vary from that of his or L1. As is reported in *Phonics and Structural Analysis for the Teacher of Reading: Programmed for Self-Instruction*, there are 44 different sounds in the English language, and only 26 letters to represent those sounds (Fox, 2010, p. 12). For an English newcomer this creates major challenges when trying to read orally. It is especially hard for ELLs to learn to manipulate special sounds

such as digraphs and long vowels. For this reason, ELLs should intentionally spend extra time in phonics instruction.

Vocabulary development. Vocabulary development is also of utmost importance for ELLs. More often than not, the vocabulary of an ELL is nowhere near the level it needs to be for the student to comprehend what they read with ease. For this reason, ELLs need direct instruction in vocabulary on a regular basis. They should also be given the opportunity to apply what they are learning in their everyday exercises. Calderon (2011) explained that vocabulary instruction should include a wide variety as educators should, “teach individual words, noun phrases, and idioms; teach word-learning strategies, such as looking for prefixes and root words; and foster word consciousness that makes clear the importance of learning as many words as possible throughout the day.” Vocabulary instruction is often overlooked in the whole scheme of literacy as many English natives are strong in this area, but that cannot be the case for ELLs.

Fluency. Fluency is an important skill for all students as fluency is a bridge to comprehension as comprehension comes much more naturally when a student can read a passage with ease. Antunez (2002) advocates for L1 instruction preceding L2 instruction in this area based on the premise that until a student becomes comfortable reading aloud in a language he or she is comfortable in, he or she will not be able to read at ease in a less comfortable language. Wojtowicz (2006) was clearly in agreement when he recommended listening to students read in their L1 as they develop fluency, explaining that even when one does not understand the language one could tell if the student was struggling over words. Other advice given by Antunez included making sure ELLs were

exposed to quality modeling on a regular basis. This aspect of fluency is very important for ELLs since it is a stepping-stone to comprehension.

Comprehension. Comprehension is another area of difficulty for ELLs. This is likely because comprehension is the culmination of all of literacy. This presents a great problem for ELLs because the goal of literacy is not being achieved if they cannot gain information from reading. Gorsuch and Arnold (2007) wrote about how a technique as simple as repeated readings of the same text is a great way for ELLs to work on comprehension. In doing this they can look up unfamiliar words in the first reading, apply that new knowledge in a second reading, and finally read for comprehension in a third reading. Summarizing is also a skill that can greatly help ELLs, as many times whole works become too much to diagnose at one time, but summarizing individual paragraphs is not. Antunez (2002) pointed out that something that should be considered for ELLs is their trouble comprehending figurative language. She suggested scanning passages in advance to look for any figurative language that would require direct instruction. Each learner's struggle is going to be unique in comprehension, but it is important to help every student learn to comprehend, no matter what the obstacle.

Suggestions for Promoting Literacy

Whatever the type of instruction being used for ELLS, and whatever the instructional style each individual teacher chooses to use, there are many things every educator can and should do to promote literacy in ELLs. One thing that can be done in a classroom to promote literacy is creating an environment of reading. Design a reading area with pillows and a rug next to the bookshelf so that students view reading as special. Krashen (1993) said that, "reading promotes reading." The more of a reading supportive

environment that is created, the more students are going to grow comfortable with reading, even in their L2. Krashen also pointed out that storytelling can impact students' literacy. Storytelling is widely used in oral cultures all around the world, and children who are emerging literates can gain just as much from storytelling. Additionally, a buddy system is a great resource for ELLs when they are becoming literate. Whether it is an English native who can be a model for the student, or an ELL peer who can share in a student's struggles as they teach each other, either scenario promotes literacy.

Educators also suggest that repetition is key when any student is learning to read. When a student is developing fluency, Antunez (2002) suggests having the student reread the same book or passage to master difficult words and sections that he or she does not understand. Wojtowicz advocates having a multi-lingual print environment in the classroom, using books, calendars, posters, and newspapers from many languages, encouraging literacy in both a student's L1 and L2. There are many things that can be done in a classroom or any type to promote literacy. Games, charts, and resources are in abundance. The important thing is that however it is done, literacy needs to be promoted for ELLs so that they are excited to become literate both in their L1 and in English.

Assessment and Accommodations

Assessment is a crucial topic in all of education as it is the gauge of student understanding and teacher instruction. Naturally, it is an even greater concern among those working with ELLs and may possibly be the final aspect needed to properly bridge the gap. Just as it is for mainstream students, assessment is the gauge of an ELL's progress. However, many times assessment forms gaps instead of closes gaps because in many classrooms across the nation, ELLs are not being properly assessed. For this

reason, they are not producing appropriate assessment results and are not having their needs properly met. Often a test over history content is not a reflection of a student's mastery of the history content, but a reflection of a student's English comprehension of the test. As Genesse (2006) put it, a math or science test administered in English becomes just as much about a student's English comprehension skills as it does his or her math and science skills (p. 137). In assessment it is important to test the objectives only. This is often not the case for ELLs. Educators must begin looking at more alternative and accommodating ways to accurately assess ELLs.

Accommodations for ELLs are crucial daily across content areas, but accommodations in assessment are of an even greater need. Until a child is fully literate in English, it is important to offer him or her content assessments in his or her L1 when necessary or desired. This avoids unnecessary miscommunication of content knowledge. Other forms of accommodations necessary may include scaffolds such as word banks with correct spelling of vocabulary terms, tests read aloud, or picture based assessments. Accommodations must be provided regularly throughout instruction to allow students to master the content that is being assessed. For example, for a Houghton-Mifflin math lesson on rounding, the authors suggest distinguishing the difference between a round ball and rounding a number (Greenes, et al., 2005, p. 36B). Teachers who have ELLs must begin to assess them more accurately. To do such, appropriate accommodations must be made both to the instruction and assessment of ELLs.

Addressing Accountability and Standards for ELLs

In most situations, ELLs are accountable for meeting national progress requirements such as AYP and state content standards. This often proves to be

challenging and problematic for ELLs, as well as a major concern for educators. When considering how to most effectively prepare these students to reach these competencies. Major consideration should first be given to language of instruction and type of instruction. One would be wise to heed to research and begin educating ELLs in their L1 for content areas, while focusing intently on the transition to English through the means of literacy instruction. As previously noted, forms of bilingual education give educators the ability to effectively educate ELLs in content areas to meet standards much more quickly, instead of slowing students' progress initially and then hindering their progress in the long run by attempting to teach them content in English before they have mastered enough of the language. Educators agree unanimously that they must tailor their instruction to meet every student's needs, and the situation is no different with ELLs. The most effective way to meet an ELL's needs in content based learning initially is by differentiating his or her instruction by means of some form of bilingual education.

Educators are also accountable for an ELL's mastery of the English language. As frequently noted, the most effective means to introduce English is through the means of literacy development. Once a student has developed literacy skills in English, it is then appropriate to transition him or her into English-based content learning. Until a student masters basic literacy skills in English, he or she is going to struggle greatly with mastering content. Content-based reading often includes more technical vocabulary and requires a higher level of literacy skills. If ELLs are expected to read and master content without first developing basic English skills, it is going to prove difficult for them to master content.

When addressing educators on the importance of a strong literacy foundation for all learners, Rebecca Alber (2010) said this: “Content is *what* we teach, but there is also the *how* and that is where literacy instruction comes in.” Literacy spans all content areas for all learners. It is the means by which a student receives and communicates new information. Without a strong literacy foundation to precede content instruction, no student can meet standards and accountability requirements. With an understanding that literacy and content based learning run on a parallel track, educators must make the decisions they feel most appropriate for both the mastery of literacy and content for their ELLs. In doing this, they will both meet standards and help close the achievement gap for this demographic.

Concluding Thoughts

The gap is large, but the pieces to bridge the chasm exist. Consideration should be given the theories of language acquisition and therefore to educating ELLs in their L1 until they are literate and cogitatively developed in that language. Schools should also take into account the benefits of bilingual education and the long-term success it brings for ELLs. Finally, educators should weave literacy promotion and the five components of literacy (phonemic awareness, phonics skills, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension) across the content areas for ELLs, with an understanding that without literacy, ELLs are less likely to master content. Above all, literacy must be the foundation of the bridge. If educators will use research-based strategies to bridge the gap, it can be done. And it should be done because every student can learn and every student deserves the chance to learn. Literacy is the bridge for the underachieving demographic and ELLs

are in desperate need for educators to heed to what the research is saying and build the bridge.

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