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Runner-up Project: Action Research Project

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Action Research Project

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Action Research Project

Research Question

“Nearly one in five children come from a home where English is not the native language and more than one in four children are Hispanic where Spanish is the primary language spoken” (Correa, Mackiewicz, & Miller, 2017, p. 209). Classrooms are more diverse now than they ever have been before. Even though this diversity greatly enriches the culture of a classroom, many teachers are not equipped with the teaching techniques to engage children who have traveled from other countries to the United States. The world of English Language Learners (ELL) and the programs that exist to help these children acclimate to an entirely new environment and language is fascinating. After gathering information from a variety of peer-reviewed resources and articles, I discovered that most children who immigrated from other countries to America are often left behind in a general education classroom because they are overwhelmed with the move into a new country and cannot quickly pick up on the English language.

Unfortunately, some teachers equate the child’s inability to grasp a new language to the need for special services. Instead of assessing where children are at using methods designed to test their knowledge base in their native language, the classroom teacher sends them off to someone else in special education. The problem with this sendoff is that most children with English as a second language need a different teaching approach and a heightened focus on visual cues as well as support from ELL interventions, not a referral for special education resources.

For my Action Research Project, I will examine how general education teachers can use ELL interventions and different teaching techniques to help students with English as a second language participate more often in class and truly grasp the knowledge that is available to them. Some of these teaching techniques and interventions include increasing family participation within the classroom, incorporating read alouds, authentic conversations that discuss feelings or opinions, independent or guided writing opportunities, and small group instruction, as well as increasing vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension skills (Schmitt, Snyder, & Witmer, 2017). Of course, each student is unique and some interventions that are helpful for one child may not be as impactful for another. In my own future classroom, I would incorporate these various intervention methods and then determine how successful they are by observing student engagement. In order to determine how engaged these students are in the classroom, I will also be looking at student participation in class and how they communicate with others in group projects and in-class activities.

Literature Review

Learning a new language can become a more daunting challenge as children grow older because as a child ages, the less “plastic” his or her brain becomes. Brain plasticity can be defined as the ability of the brain to change and adapt as more information is learned throughout life. According to Erin Hoiland (2018), “Long lasting functional changes in the brain occur when we learn new things or memorize new information”. All of this new information either creates or rearranges neural pathways within the brain. So, it would seem that if educators were able to determine if English Language Learners needed special services earlier on, they could provide an

education that would be more beneficial for the student. However, this is not always the case and there is often an overrepresentation of minorities in special education services.

In a study conducted by Belinda Hardin, Mariana Mereiou, Hsuan-Fang Hung, and Marisa Roach Scott, it was found that many of the diagnostic screening tools used in preschools to determine whether children need special services were sometimes unreliable because of the need to translate English into another language. Even if translators were available, they were not always trustworthy. This unreliability stemmed from the translator being unfamiliar with some of the terms used during the diagnostic screening, or older siblings sometimes filled in as the translator, because they knew limited English. Also, children need time to adapt to a new language, but many state and federal deadlines regarding special education have very strict deadlines regarding the administration of services. These deadlines make it difficult for educators to determine if children are simply adjusting to a new classroom, or if they are behind their other peers, either developmentally, academically, or both. Most children are able to learn limited English to communicate in various social settings, but it can take around five to eight years to become proficient in English in an academic setting (Hardin, Hung, Mereiou, & Roach-Scott, 2009).

The unreliability of translators and the short deadlines required by state and federal laws are only some of the challenges that parents, teachers, and administrative personnel identified during the study. Some of the other drawbacks regarding English language learners and their overrepresentation in special education include the language barrier between families and school personnel as well as parent participation (Hardin et al., 2009). Early childhood educators tried their best to eliminate these barriers by arranging home visits, to learn about the child's home life

and family values. Even though many Latino families in this study stated that they trusted the staff at their child's school, they were afraid of participating in parent meetings or home visits because of the illegal status of some of their family members (Hardin et al., 2009). Despite this fear, educators continued to work with families and build trust while also doing their best to provide appropriate special services or interventions targeted at improving the child's use of the English language. However, many administrative personnel felt that educators were unable to provide appropriate interventions for ELLs because of the lack of training provided by the state.

In another study conducted by Karolyn King, she found that before the administration of a literacy framework known as Kindergarten Talk, or K-Talk, ELL Kindergarten students were receiving a lackluster form of intervention regarding the learning of a new language. During the intervention time, students were presented with different flashcards with images on them. The teacher would say the word of the image on the card and then the children would try their best to repeat that word. The students were often confused and tried to repeat the new vocabulary word as best as they could. These sessions went on for thirty minutes, twice a week (King, 2011). There was no interaction or conversation with the new language the children were learning, they were simply expected to repeat foreign words. Needless to say, this form of intervention was extremely ineffective and the ELL students struggled to keep up with their other classroom peers.

Thankfully, the kindergarten teachers and ELL specialists worked together to come up with a more effective intervention strategy, known as K-Talk. Teachers pulled from the literacy framework they had been using in their classroom and adapted it to meet the various needs of the students. Some of the components of the framework include interactive and shared writing, read

aloud stories, and hands-on activities. The ELL interventions now focused on guiding students to interact with the English language more deeply and by creating an environment that was welcoming and allowed for students to make mistakes and learn from them. For example, one lesson could focus on a new vocabulary word like “leaves”.

First, a teacher would take the students outside and let them examine the different types of leaves and all of their colors. They could rake leaves, jump in them, or watch them fall from trees. Next, the students would go back inside and listen to the teacher read a picture book about leaves. After the reading, students are encouraged to write their own stories about the experiences they had with the leaves outside while the teacher asks probing questions and providing feedback about the students’ writing (King, 2011, p. 27). After implementing the new K-Talk intervention, students overall academic achievement and language acquisition improved within the year. Even though this intervention was tailored to the needs of Kindergarten students, it could be implemented for older children as well. However, there is an even greater lack of interventions available for ELL students when they move to the United States as middle school or high school students.

In the third study I reviewed, the researchers focused on high school students who had either received ELL services in the past, or were in need of these interventions. Despite the fact that some of these students had received ELL services during elementary school, they scored lower than their peers on Mathematics and English Language Arts exams and they also had lower graduation rates. “As a result, both test data and high school graduation rates document the staggering need for identifying and implementing effective teaching models and strategies” (Gerena & Keiler, 2012, p. 78). Learning is a continuous cycle, but many ELL students do not

continue to receive intervention time when they graduate from elementary school to middle school, or middle school to high school. More often than not, ELL students who have achieved “proficient” English no longer qualify for services, even though it would be beneficiary for them to receive continued support and scaffolded instruction (Gerena & Keiler, 2012). This lack of support can be linked back to the short supply of ELL teachers and education about the benefits of differentiated instruction. The researchers of this study set out to provide high school ELL students with Teaching Assistant Scholars (TAS) that were trained to provide differentiated instruction regarding math and science. The majority of these TAS were also bilingual. All of the students that participated in this study had previously failed the standardized math and science exams in New York (Gerena & Keiler, 2012).

ELL students in the study were split into groups of three and four and each of the TAS worked with the students to determine their knowledge level and help clarify any content the students did not understand. Educational content for each session was planned by teachers and the sessions lasted for an hour and a half. In the math portion of the intervention, TAS guided students to work as a group in solving various math problems that ranged in complexity. For science, students worked on lab activities, textbook readings, and group posters (Gerena & Keiler, 2012). After the interventions and tutoring sessions, the students took the standardized exams again.

In all categories of the exams, ELL students performed “as well as or better than their English-only counterparts in the program” (Gerena & Keiler, 2012, p. 91). After the study was completed, the TAS recognized some of the teaching strategies and techniques they used to help them connect to the students. Some of these strategies included relating the students’ background

experiences and home life to the content they were learning, using ELL-centered approaches, and scaffolding instruction and content (Gerena & Keiler, 2012). Many of the students in the study stated that they were able to connect to their TAS because they were also bilingual. If they could not understand a concept in English, the TAS was able to relay the information in Spanish, French, or even Creole. In order for students to truly understand and grasp new concepts, there has to be a connection between the teacher and the student. In our educational world today, there is a great need for bilingual teachers and ELL specialists to provide that missing connection for our students.

Research plan. Before providing ELL interventions with my students, I will first conduct home visits and interviews with families, if they are willing. These meetings will help me to see what the child's home life is like on a day to day basis. I can also keep notes of family values, child rearing practices, what kind of conversations take place, and if there is any English spoken in the home. Next, I will provide planned intervention time for my ELL students in a small group setting. During my interventions, I will use a framework similar to that of K-Talk, modified for my preschool students. Our intervention time will focus on shared reading time, interactive writing time, hands-on activities, and authentic conversations. Families are extremely important in any educational setting, so I will encourage them to participate at home by using many of the same strategies I will use in my classroom.

Shared reading time is a highly important component in learning a new language. Books give children the ability to become familiar with print concepts and the flow of a language. At the beginning of the year, I will be incorporating mostly picture books into our intervention time and I will gradually introduce books with more print. During shared reading time, I will also ask

the students about what they think is happening within the pictures of the book and record their answers. Families can also get involved with shared reading time at home. The parents of ELL students may not be able to speak or read English, but they can still become involved. I will encourage parents to have conversations with their children about their day at school and keep notes about what their child is saying. Encouraging children to become more verbal in their native language paves the way for them to become comfortable with speaking a new language as well.

Young preschoolers have not yet learned how to write a story, but I will encourage them to tell me one and I can write it down for them, while asking questions about the events that took place in their story, how they felt, and what happened next. I am able to speak and read some Spanish, but hopefully there will be a para there who can also translate for me. As the year progresses, I can collect the stories the children have told me and document the progress they have made by looking at the words they are using to describe everyday events and if they are verbally able to communicate to me in English. For students who are nonverbal, I will use hand signals and visual cues or directions to determine children's progress in learning a new language. I can also create picture books for children to use as communication tools. If my ELL students are still struggling to understand my visual cues and nonverbal signals, I may need to determine if they are in need of special services.

The last components of intervention time are hands-on activities and authentic conversations. I will spend a lot of time with the alphabet, vowel and consonant sounds, and how the letters of the alphabet combine to make words. We will work on new vocabulary by spending playtime inside and outside the classroom, to immerse children in an environment that provides

them with plenty of opportunities to learn new words. I will also make sure to model positive behaviors with all my students. Young children learn from watching others, so it will be important to provide them with positive examples to follow.

To determine if my intervention methods are effective for ELL students, I will keep a folder for each child. The folder will include my notes from family meetings and home visits, family member's notes about the conversations they have at home with their child, my records of the stories the students have communicated to me, a list of the books we have read during shared reading time, and my observation notes from playtime. Observation will be a key component throughout the data collection process. In order to determine if students are engaged in the classroom and if they have made progress in learning English, I will be looking at their participation in class discussions and group activities. I will also keep note of their behaviors in class. For example, if I modeled how to share classroom toys with another student, I would keep a record of their behavior the next time they were asked to share a classroom toy with others. I will periodically check each ELL student's folder throughout the year to determine the progress they have made. If a certain aspect of my intervention is not effective in providing a student with a deep understanding of the English language, I will regroup with the paraprofessionals in my classroom and the child's family members to find a better way to connect with the child.

In conclusion, English Language Learners require more support, interventions, and differentiated instruction within a general education classroom. The need for this type of support does not go away as children progress through school, because the learning process is a continuous cycle. However, being an English Language Learner does not automatically require a student for special education services. Minorities are often overrepresented in the special

education system because of the time that is required to learn a new language. Our classrooms are becoming more diverse with each passing school year and teachers need to be prepared to connect with and educate all of their students. There is a greater need for bilingual teachers and ELL interventionists, but these resources are difficult to find. Within my own future classroom, I plan to use intervention time with students to introduce them to the English language. I will do this by implementing shared reading time, interactive writing time, hands-on activities, and authentic conversations into the classroom. By working with students in small groups and providing a safe and nurturing environment to learn in, I hope to present English Language Learners with plenty of opportunities to interact with the English language.

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