

Bridging English Language Learner Achievement Gaps through Effective Vocabulary Development Strategies

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Abstract

Despite a well-documented history of immigration in the United States of America and rise in population of students that speak a language other than English, academic achievement gaps between English Language Learners and their native English language speaking counterparts from Grades Pre-Kindergarten through the college/university level still exist. This research paper conducted a review of philosophical and scholarly literature which displayed evidence that vocabulary development is a major section that educators should consider focusing for to better achievement with English as Second Language students. Implementing educational practices that promote high-frequency vocabulary learning, using teaching approaches that include cognitive and metacognitive strategy, along with incorporating computer-based instruction into language development activities were found to be effective strategies. The discussion of the identified strategies presented in the present review of literature concludes with recommendations for administrators and education professionals serving English Language Learners and English as Second Language students in various learning environments.

Keywords: achievement gaps, English language learner, English as a second language, English language acquisition, English language development, Spanish-English cognate

1. Introduction

Fayon, Goff and Duranczyk, (2010) explained that English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing high school graduate group in the United States (U.S.). Achievement gaps between students proficient in English and their L2 counterparts has always existed in the United States. ELLs from Pre-K through College experience language barriers when in U.S. education facilities, public schools, colleges and universities. A number of studies have indicated that the numbers of ELLs are expected to continue to rise (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012; English language learners, n.d.; Fayon, Goff, & Duranczyk, 2010; Herbert, 2012; Russakoff & Foundation for Child, 2011). Russakoff and Foundation for Child (2011) cited Thomas and Collier (2002) which explained that by 2030, the ELL population in the U.S. school system would be at 40%. Herbert (2012) cited Goldenberg (2008) that displayed similar statistics that ELLs by 2050 are expected to make up 40% of the population in the U.S.; with evidence from the Department of Education that 400 native languages will be included in the English as a Second Language (ESL) population. In the 2010-2011 school years in U.S. public schools, approximately 10% (4.7 million) students were classified as ELLs according to data cited from the National Center for Education Statistics (English language learners, n.d.).

With the rise of ELL and immigrant inhabitants, their success is important to the future of the nation. Several studies exist displaying a trend of achievement gaps that exist between ELLs and L2 students (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; McEneaney, López, & Nieswandt, 2014; Pardini, 2006). The research exhibits a clear pattern that performance gaps pertaining to ELLs are an issue that exist in grades Pre-K through the college and university level of education. To address achievement gaps in the area of ESL development, an evaluation of the best teaching strategies for educators to use in providing ELLs the fastest path to obtaining proficiency in English through vocabulary development is necessary.

2. Background

The literature displays a history of several languages being spoken in the U.S. Olson (2015) explained that in the

13 colonies, English was not initially the proclaimed language of the land. A number of languages were spoken (German, Dutch, French, Swedish and Polish) during this time period and the writers of the U.S. Constitution did not recognize one language being more dominant than the other. Approximately 100 years later, several states in the 1880s began drafting mandates with English being the instructional language.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2, 1964. The legislation ordered the desegregation of public facilities that included educational facilities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 declared in Title IV, Sec. 410, that nothing in the classification could prohibit assignment based on race, color, religion or national origin (Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1964).

Following the legislation, a series of laws were passed to ensure that L2 learners were receiving adequate academic support in an effort to reduce achievement gaps. *Lau vs. Nichols* is a significant case in the history of establishing instructional practices for ESL students. The lawsuit filed by the Chinese parents in 1974 demanded that affirmative action be taken to not deny language minorities the same quality education as their non-ELL counterparts (Olson, 2015; *Lau vs. Nichols*, No. 72-6520, 414 U.S. 56, Supreme court case, 1974; Russakoff & Foundation for the Child, 2011). *Plyer v. Doe*, a later court case banned the denial of education funding to immigrant children (Olson, 2015).

Reducing the achievement gaps between English L1 and L2 students resurfaced to the political forefront with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. The legislation implemented an accountability system to monitor student performance through standardized testing. This system was argued to be ineffective for meeting the goals of L2 students. Russakoff & Foundation for the Child (2011) cited data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] (2009) that only 6% of ELLs were rated as being proficient in reading at the start of their fourth grade year in U.S. public schools. Recently, the NCLB Act was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which was an executive order passed in 2015 by President Barack Obama to reform the provisions of the NCLB Act of 2002 in the public education system in the U.S.

3. Purpose

The key to closing achievement gaps between ELLs and their non-ELL peers is to identify effective language teaching and learning practices. The goal of this research paper was to conduct a philosophical review of literatures that identifies the most effective teaching strategy to promote high-frequency English Language Development (ELD) and retention. This descriptive, literature-based study evaluated ESL attainment strategies that education professionals can use from the elementary through the college level.

4. Research Question

The following research question was posed:

What are the best educational strategies used to develop English Language Acquisition (ELA) among English Language learners struggling to develop and retain English Language Proficiency?

5. Discussion

A review of the literature displays evidence that several teaching strategies should be considered when teaching ESL students. A thorough review of most research studies pointed to vocabulary development being the main strategy that educators relied on to build proficiency in language skill development for ESL students (Adesope, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2011; Chung, 2012; Hernández, Montelongo, Delgado, Holguín, & Carmona, 2014; Nam, 2010; Qanwal & Karim, 2014).

5.1 Cognitive Strategy

Students acquire second language development skills at different levels. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) explained that application of cognitive theory is one way that the educator can facilitate learning in a complex manner. Facilitating instruction using this avenue helps the teacher to overcome certain confines of the L2 learner's conceptual capacity to receive vocabulary instruction. Kashefian-Naeeni and Maarof (2010) offered findings from Oxford (1990) that cognitive strategies are methods to link new information to schemata that already exist.

5.2 Metacognitive Strategy

Wei, Chen and Adawu (2014) cited Flavell (1979) definition of metacognition as meaning "knowledge and cognition about phenomena" (p.906). The metacognitive strategy has two stages which are metacognitive regulation and metacognitive knowledge. The utilization of Strategy Based Instruction (SBI) can have a significant effect on the L2 learner's development. In regards to metacognitive instructional models, Wei, Chen and Adawu (2014) cited De La Paz and Graham (2002) Self-regulated Strategy Development Model and Charlot and O'Malley (1996) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) as being two of the

more frequently used models. Using metacognitive strategies is an approach that teachers of ESL students should heavily consider, as this powerful and purposeful methodology concurs with the findings of Kashefian-Naeeni & Maarof (2010), which cited Oxford (1990) metacognitive strategies that aim to complete organizing, focusing and evaluating the learning of an individual.

5.3 Vocabulary Building

A considerable number of researchers have argued that using specified vocabulary building strategies play an important role in closing achievement gaps. Nam (2010) expressed that vocabulary development and retention plays a pivotal part in the classroom environment serving ESL students. The research by Nam (2010) concluded that second language learning occurred with the usage of visual representation, translation texts and task-based vocabulary learning approaches. Among these vocabulary learning approaches are the usage of pictorial vocabulary teaching, fill-in-the-blank, storytelling and matching activities; which concurs with several of the findings by Chung (2012) that found using word play activities, reading to children and contextual vocabulary teaching as being effective methods for educators to use. Adesope, Lavin, Thompson and Ungerleider (2011) displayed evidence that using pedagogical strategies in ESL student's literacy development is an effective strategy. Using cooperative reading, phonics and writing skills are methodological practices that are appropriate to facilitate ESL vocabulary and literacy enhancement initiatives.

5.4 Using Spanish-English Cognates

Hernández, Montelongo, Delgado, Holguín & Carmona (2014) defined English-Spanish cognates as “words that are spelled similarly or identically in both English and Spanish and possess the same or near the same meanings in both languages as a result of a shared etymology” (p. 36). Montelongo & Hernández (2013) cited Corson (1997) and Johnston (1941) in explaining that teachers have recommended the usage of cognates in practice to build English proficiency in ELLs. There are over 20,000 Spanish-English cognates that use the similarity between semantic and morphological features to teach ELLs vocabulary at a fast pace. The research showed that using picture books, word walls and anchor charts are prescribed methods for including the use of Spanish-English cognates into regular classroom instruction (Montelongo, Delgado, Holguín, & Carmona, 2014; Montelongo & Hernández, 2013).

5.5 Computer-based Instruction

Using technology to facilitate ELA and vocabulary learning is an important consideration with a trend of literature to support the ideology of using computer software as a part of teaching lessons. Olibie (2010) explained that Computer-assisted Language Learning is when computer platforms are utilized to improve education. Montelongo and Hernández (2013) explained that using an English-Spanish cognate database can provide educators with a compilation source of creating vocabulary building exercises; since both English and Spanish are both semantically even and have the same etymological roots. Wei, Chen and Adawu (2014) demonstrated in a case study that the usage of multimedia software in SBI yielded positive results pertaining to metacognitive writing development at the beginning levels of teaching ESL learners.

6. Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations should be considered:

6.1 Cognate of the Day

The teacher should consider shaping lesson plans to where the teacher uses Spanish-English cognates on a daily basis. This task can be completed by having a “Spanish-English Cognate of the Day” exercise. The exercise would require each student to read the Spanish-English Cognate of the Day out loud and have the student use the cognate in a sentence.

6.2 Open Source Learning Software Implementation

Educational facilities should consider utilizing open-sourced vocabulary building media software and online tools to teach ELLs. The deployment of both formal and informal tools like voice recognition software, video flash cards and free or low cost online grammar courses should be included as a regular part of ESL class daily routines. Using informal media based instruction will provide students with an atmosphere where they speak the second language regularly with peers in an environment that mistakes can be quickly observed, analyzed and corrected. The open source software that uses formal grammar instruction can be used to ensure that the student understands the proper grammatical structure with which the language should be spoken and written.

7. Conclusion

The review of scholarly literature displayed evidence that vocabulary development is one of the main areas that

educational leaders should place emphasis on when designing curriculum and instructional practices to narrow achievement gaps between ELLs and their non-ELL counterparts. Using “fast-paced” vocabulary building exercise can be facilitated through the use of Spanish-English cognates; along with combining technology with the best vocabulary teaching methodological approaches. There is no “one size fits all” approach. The technological software provides tools for the educator to use, but the education facility leadership at multiple levels should assess the best vocabulary implementation strategies in accordance with vocabulary development learning objectives. Further research conducting a more extensive examination of specific technologies and vocabulary learning strategies that can be used to close achievement gaps would be a beneficial contribution to the current body of existing research. Qualitative research-based findings can be used to link the best ESL vocabulary development methodologies to specific educational facility types and demonstrate a pattern of approaches that are effective; as well as eliminating ineffective strategies. Furthermore, quantitative research can provide statistical evidence to support qualitative research studies.

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