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Instructional Practices That Hinder And Support Esl Students In The Self-Contained ESL Classroom and The Mainstream Classroom

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INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT HINDER AND SUPPORT ESL STUDENTS IN THE SELF-CONTAINED ESL CLASSROOM AND THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper describes the academic challenges that many English Second Language (ESL) students must deal with from the moment they start attending a bilingual program at elementary school until they finish the last step of their academic experience. These students continually struggle to keep up with their peers, often fail the state mandated tests, and eventually, drop out before receiving their high school diploma. For the past three years, both as a self-contained ESL teacher and an ESL certified co-teacher in the mainstream classroom, I taught ESL Language Arts to Spanish- speaking students at a public junior high school in *Harris County Consolidated Independent School District (CISD) located in Raytown, Texas. After witnessing firsthand the failing grades and the low test scores received by my ESL students every year, I have pondered the factors that both promote and impede their academic success in the public school system. In this professional paper, I will first outline specifically what challenges such students face; finally I will elaborate on what effective strategies and practices may be implemented to meet such challenges in the public school context. It is my hope that such a response could help to close the learning gap and provide ESL students a more equitable education that would develop their full intellectual potential.

* Except for the state, the names for the city, district and school that appear throughout the thesis are pseudonyms.

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Bilingual Education Programs
English (Second Language)
English (Language)
Language Proficiency
Language Skills
Second Language Learning
Second Language Instruction
Cultural Background

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The English Language Learner's (ELL's) level of literacy in his or her language, how education is viewed in his or her native culture, and his or her motivation to blend into the American culture undeniably impact his or her success in the U.S. public school system. As an English Second Language (ESL) teacher, most of these individual factors are beyond my control, but I can exercise some control over classroom practices and interpretation of state and local policies. My recent experience in both an ESL and a mainstream class at a junior high school in Raytown, Texas, has led me to reflect on some of the challenges facing English Language Learners and to question whether current classroom practices and interpretation of state mandates have helped them achieve their potential.

In the fall of 2009, when I was first hired as an ESL teacher at Sam Houston Junior School, a junior high school in the predominantly white blue collar town of Raytown, Texas, I was not aware of the issues that were hanging like a black cloud over the ESL program of Harris County CISD (Consolidated Independent School District). The program lacked a unified sense of direction and leadership; the individual ESL programs in each school were run according to the local teachers' theories of language learning. There was no conformity of goals and standards. As student records were inaccurate, ESL teachers had no prior knowledge of how long a student had been in the United States nor of the outcome of his or her previous test scores from a school outside the district. From what I observed, the Harris County ESL program was in a state of disarray, which seemed to be simply accepted by the administration, most likely because it had been that way from its inception. Though a new coordinator with extensive experience in

bilingual and ESL education was hired to revamp and improve the ESL and bilingual programs in the summer of 2010, there was still significant resistance coming from the Harris County bilingual and ESL faculty who preferred to continue the program without any interference. Unfortunately, the situation at Harris County CISD reflects the situation of many other districts in the state of Texas. Bilingual and ESL programs have traditionally been neglected and not given the attention they have greatly needed and deserved.

This paper will describe the instructional practices that are currently being utilized in ESL education in public schools across Texas, based on my own experiences in both self-contained ESL classrooms as the lead teacher and in mainstream classrooms as an ESL certified co-teacher. This reality will be compared and contrasted with what are regarded as "best practices" in the current literature on teaching ELLs. Since almost all of my students were Hispanic, I will address their particular cultural experience and the practices that both hindered and promoted their success in the self-contained ESL classroom and in the mainstream classroom. Latest research and current literature are cited to support my discussion. At the end of this paper, I will recommend beneficial and constructive practices for ESL learners.

Chapter 2

Background

I taught ESL in both the self-contained ESL classroom and the mainstream classroom at Sam Houston Junior School from 2009-2011. Until 2010, ESL students had been placed in self-contained ESL classes where the Language Arts curriculum was taught at an appropriate pace for ESL students. This type of transitional program is called "sheltered English immersion" where instruction is provided to students in English at a speed they can understand and taught by a trained ESL teacher. However, in 2010, Harris County CISD decided to dissolve the ESL classes and integrate the students into the mainstream classroom. Harris County CISD made this decision as a result of severe budget cuts that impacted all districts across Texas, forcing them to take extraordinary measures like cutting special programs and terminating teachers and support staff positions. Luckily, Harris County CISD did not dismiss of any of its teachers, but they did eliminate the self-contained ESL classes that had been costly for the district.

Perhaps their decision was not surprising as the ESL program had been neglected and left to its own devices for years. Despite the increasing number of ESL students enrolled in the district each year, the groundwork for an effective ESL program had not been implemented in any of its schools, or in the state as a whole. The Texas Education Code (TEC), Chapter 29, Subchapter B, §29.051 through §29.064 (1995), as cited by the Texas Education Agency Department of Accountability and School Accreditation, states that: "Bilingual education is instruction in which students learn to read and write in their native tongue while gradually transitioning to English." Although this definition seems straightforward, much confusion exists nationwide over exactly what bilingual education is.

As Christine H. Rossell (2003) explains in her report,

> The purpose of bilingual education is to prepare the child for taking the TAKS test in English as soon as possible, but clearly there is a huge disconnect between what the state defines as bilingual education and how it is implemented in elementary schools. State officials are able to subvert the law through interpretations that do not conform to its intent, and school districts can change their policies without making genuine changes in curriculum; furthermore, teachers can ignore mandates, closing their classroom doors and doing as they wish. (p. 44)

This was the case at Harris County CISD; bilingual teachers ran their classes as they pleased without a district wide policy aligned with the bilingual laws of Texas.

My group of students was homogenous as they were all Mexican-Americans. Some of them had immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico between the ages of three to five; however, the great majority of them were born in the U.S. They typically spoke Spanish with their families at home and their friends at school since they mostly befriended other Mexican-American students. These students who had lived in the U.S. all or most of their lives and attended bilingual programs starting from kindergarten were of low language proficiency in both English and Spanish**.**

With respect to the other instructors, I found that districts across Texas typically hire bilingual teachers who are native speakers of Spanish, and many are more comfortable teaching in their own language. As a result, the language of instruction is frequently in Spanish, and if and when it is in English, the language is often very limited or incorrect. Consequently, students often remain in these classes many years since they do not learn enough English to transition into mainstream classrooms (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Also, students in bilingual education

are not required to be tested on the English TAKS for the first three years, namely from third grade to fifth grade. Rossell (2009) suggests that "testing these students in English would be the best way to hold schools accountable for their English language acquisition and an excellent way to give schools credit for the extraordinary job they do of teaching English and content such as math and science to non-English speaking students" (p.3). However, most schools across Texas choose not to administer the TAKS in English to their Spanish-speaking students. The Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC), the committee which all districts that provide ESL and/or bilingual programs must establish and operate, determines which version of the test the student takes. This committee often decides that a student should take the test in Spanish because it is expected that the student would obtain a higher score than if he or she were to take it in English. Higher scores improve the image of the school and open a door for increased funding.

In many schools there are currently two separate worlds: the world of ESL and the mainstream world in which typical American schooling takes place (Harklau, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1999). This division causes the bilingual student to be locked into the world of ESL and become what some practitioners have referred to as ESL "lifers" (Valdes, 2001). They remain in ESL for the rest of their academic lives. They enter middle school as part of the ESL track and remain in the program during their entire four years of high school as well. In the best of cases, even when they are "mainstreamed" in other subject matter classes, few non-English background students ever manage to enroll in regular (non-ESL) college-prep English courses (Valdes, 2001). In my context, students who exited the ESL program at Sam Houston were placed into mainstream classes that were not as rigorous as regular classes were. Cummins (Cummins & Swain, 1986) has noted that limited English proficiency is often confounded with a lack of academic and intellectual ability. Thus, language-minority students are more frequently placed in

low-track mainstream classes out of an apprehension that their language proficiency was not sufficient to compete in high-track courses (Harklau, 1994b, 1994c). All these negative educational experiences have made Hispanics the most undereducated segment of the U.S. population. One study conducted by National Council of La Raza (1991) concluded that Hispanics tend to enter school later, leave school earlier, and are less likely to complete high school or participate in postsecondary school.

When ESL students enter junior high school, they are very often faced with a rude awakening. Soon after their arrival, bilingual students must take the TAKS test in English in sixth grade, and they usually find themselves completely unprepared and unable to pass the test. A high percentage of these students not only fail the TAKS Reading test, but also the Math TAKS. Additionally, they struggle in other subjects as they have simply not acquired the necessary language skills to be successful. Bilingual education as it is currently delivered is not only inadequate, but also ineffective in equipping ESL learners to transition to English-only classes and be successful on state-mandated tests.

From my observations at Harris County CISD, it was apparent that the district had not made the necessary provisions when they discontinued the ESL program in favor of mainstreaming the ESL students. When students entered regular classes, school administrators later realized that not all teachers at Sam Houston Junior were ESL certified, contrary to what was mandated by law. Thus, given my position as one of the few ESL certified teachers at my institution, I was hurriedly assigned to be a co-teacher to those lead teachers who were not ESL certified. In a questionable attempt to comply with state regulations, the Harris County CISD administration listed my name as the lead teacher of the ESL students in these classes, thereby

limiting their exposure to liability. My position as a co-teacher would begin during the 2010-2011 academic year with no clear direction or guidance regarding what was expected of me.

Bilingual Education Debates at the National Level

The situation that developed at Sam Houston needs to be seen against the backdrop of the state of bilingual education in the United States as a whole. Bilingual education has existed in the United States for over three hundred years. However, history shows that the pendulum has swung both for and against, depending on the political climate at a given time. It has long been an arena of unabated controversy.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States, until World War II, linguistic diversity was often accepted and the presence of different languages was frequently encouraged in religious institutions, in the press, and in both private and public schools (Baker, 2006). However, there were early exceptions to this acceptance of language diversity, such as Benjamin Franklin's anti-German stance in the 1750s, the California legislature mandating only-English instruction in 1855, and the ruthless suppression policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1880s (Crawford, 2004). As Collins states (2006), "The concept of bilingualism and language minorities was not part of a major consciousness about language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A high-profile and much-debated U.S. language policy has emerged in the last hundred years."

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, a change of attitude towards bilingualism and bilingual education occurred. The increase of the number of immigrants to the United States and the entry of the United States in the World War in 1917 brought out ant-German sentiments and extra pressure for immigrants to assimilate into American culture

through monolingual education. Linguistic diversity was replaced by linguistic intolerance. Becoming an American meant the elimination of other languages and cultures.

During the next forty years, there were several historical incidents that paved the way for a less restrictive period and more acceptance of bilingualism. A case in 1923 known as *Meyer vs. Nebraska* concerned a teacher who taught a Bible story in German to a ten year-old child. The U.S. Supreme Court declared that a Nebraska state law prohibiting the teaching of a foreign language to elementary school students was unconstitutional. The Nebraska ruling stated that such teaching in a different language produced ideas and attachments that were foreign to the best interests of the country. The Supreme Court, in overturning the Nebraska ruling, found that proficiency of a foreign language was "not injurious to the health, morals, or understanding of the ordinary child." However, the Supreme Court finding did not support bilingualism or bilingual education. The Court observed that the desire of a state legislature to foster a homogeneous people was acceptable (Baker, 2006). In 1958, the National Defense of Education Act was passed and foreign language learning was encouraged in elementary schools, high schools, and universities. This law helped to create a slightly more tolerant attitude to languages spoken by ethnic groups in the U.S. Shortly after, the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of color, race or creed. This act ushered in a less negative attitude to ethnic groups and possibilities for increased tolerance of ethnic languages at the federal level.

The restoration of bilingual education is often attributed to Cubans living in Dade County, Florida, in 1963. Believing that they would be in the U.S. temporarily, the educated middle-class made the effort to maintain Spanish, their mother tongue, and established a dual-language school which received both political support and funding. In 1967, Texas senator Ralph Yarborough introduced the Bilingual Education Act which was enacted in 1968 as Title VII of

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Wiese & Garcia, 2001). This piece of legislation authorized federal funds to be allocated for minority language speakers while they transitioned to English in the classroom (Baker, 2006). Since 1968, the Act has been re-authorized in 1974, 1978, 1984, 1988, 1994 and 2001.

A further landmark in bilingual education was a lawsuit which was brought on behalf of Chinese students against the San Francisco School District in 1970. The case concerned whether or not non-English speaking students received equal educational opportunities when instructed in a language they could not understand. The failure to provide bilingual education was alleged to violate both the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Baker, 2006). The case, known as *Lau vs. Nichols*, was rejected by the federal district court and a court of appeals, but it was accepted by the Supreme Court in 1974. The verdict outlawed mainstreaming programs for language minority students. However, the Court did not mandate what effective measures would have to taken in order to achieve educational opportunities for language minority children. Furthermore, the means as to how the educational disadvantages would be overcome were not declared. Nevertheless, during this era, there was modest growth in bilingual education and ethnic community mother tongue schools (Fishman, 2006).

The 1968 Bilingual Education Act (Title VII and part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) provided a compensatory poverty program for the educationally disadvantaged among language minorities (Baker, 2006). It did not require schools to accommodate a child's home language. However, it did allow educators to use 'home languages' in the classroom (Baker, 2006). The 1974 amendments to the 1968 Bilingual Education Act required schools receiving grants to include instruction in a student's home language as to allow the child to

progress effectively through the educational system (Wiese & Garcia, 2001). Effective progress in student achievement could be made in English or in his or her mother tongue. However, with the rise of pressure groups such as English First and U.S. English in the 1980s, there was a move against bilingualism and growing support for monolingualism and cultural assimilation.

Fierce debates rose about how much a student's native language should be used (Rhee, 1999). Some argued that it was essential that a child acquired literacy skills in his or her native language before English was introduced. Others argued that educational equality and opportunity could only be realized by teaching English as early as possible and by students being assimilated quickly into the mainstream culture (Baker, 2006).

During this period, the Reagan administration was generally hostile to bilingual education. Reagan believed that preserving one's native language meant neglecting English language acquisition. Bilingual programs were seen as delaying or preventing English language competence in students, so bilingual programs were dismissed in favor of mainstreaming and transitional programs.

In the next decade, the Clinton administration viewed language as a resource (Crawford, 2004). Proficient bilingualism became a desirable goal. The 1994 Amendments to the Bilingual Education Act resulted in more funding for a larger number of dual language programs.

The debate leading to Proposition 227 in California was introduced as an effort to improve English language instruction for children who needed to learn English for economic and employment opportunities. It aimed at outlawing bilingual education. Despite Latinos' opposition, Proposition 227 was passed on June 2, 1998. The text of Proposition 227 stated that all children in California public schools would be taught English upon enrolling in public

schools. Bilingual education was virtually eliminated; instead, sheltered or English-immersion programs were put into place (Orellana et al., 1999; Quezada et al., 1999; Crawford, 2004). However, there was a provision made for parental waivers which preserved some bilingual education where there was strong parental support and a history of effective bilingual programs. Wiley and Wright (2004) indicate variations across California to the extent to which parents were informed of their right to waivers from English-only programs and the continuation of some quality bilingual programs.

On April 28 1998, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, declared his non-support for Proposition 227. Secretary Riley (1998) asserted that the one size fits all approach to learning English "is not supported by research." Instead, he affirmed, "the economic, cultural, and political importance of being bilingual in our global culture."

In direct contrast, in 2001, the bilingual Education Act was replaced by new federal legislation entitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB) which still governs schools today. Any mention of bilingualism or developing native language competencies is completely absent (Wiley & Wright, 2004). While bilingual education programs can still apply for funding, the funds are really meant for English-only instruction (Baker, 2006). The law heavily focuses on high-stakes assessment and requires the testing of English language skills for LEP students. The enactment of NCLB eliminated a direct federal role in supporting bilingual education. Instead, the U.S. government now requires accountability plans that include measurable outcomes and monitors implementation. After California, most bilingual programs were also dismantled in Arizona (2000) and Massachusetts (2002).

Today bilingual education continues to be a controversial topic with strong advocates on both sides. Adamson (2005) summarizes the claims in favor of Bilingual Education (BE) as:

1. It helps to ease the home-school transition
2. It allows the students to learn the background knowledge and study skills necessary for academic work in any language
3. It allows students (and their new country) to preserve a valuable resource, that is, fluency in a second language (L2) (p.222-223)

Those against bilingual education make arguments based on evaluations of bilingual programs, on political considerations, and on personal experiences. It is important in making these claims to understand the limitations of the research studies and consider the variables of each unique situation. During the 1980s, bilingual education opponents, who were faced with mandatory bilingual education, argued that it was not appropriate in all circumstances. Now bilingual education proponents faced with mandatory English-only instruction, argue the same. As Adamson (2005) notes, "After twenty years of bitter debate, perhaps both sides can agree on at least this principle: no form of instruction is best in all circumstances" (p.224).

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Background

In this section of the paper I will discuss relevant research and theoretical constructs that impact bilingual learners of English. These theories are drawn from the fields of educational research and research of language acquisition.

A continuing controversy in bilingual language education is the question of how to define language proficiency. Reading and writing are necessary for academic success, but knowing how to read and write alone does not make one proficient in a language. Just because someone can communicate a social message does not mean he or she is able to understand abstract concepts and communicate his or her understanding of them. Thus, the notion of language proficiency in a school context differs greatly from common perception because academic success necessitates a high level of literacy. Basic language proficiency, which includes primarily oral skills, and academic language proficiency, which also includes literacy skills, must be distinguished (Adamson, 2005). A successful student must be competent in both.

Bilingual education theorist, Jim Cummins (1984a, 1984b, 2000b) has developed a theoretical rationale for bilingual education which differentiates simple communication skills from the language proficiency necessary to meet the cognitive and academic demands of the classroom. Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) is exercised when individuals use contextual supports and props for language delivery. BICS is communication which is often informal and usually augmented by facial expressions, gestures, and body language. As Watts-Taffe and Truscott (2000) describe BICS, it is context-embedded: meaning occurs within a

communicative event rich with many language cues that lie beyond the actual spoken words. Due to the complexity of the context, precision in use of vocabulary and standard grammatical features is not required for successful communication. ELLs are exposed to BICS English on the playground, in the cafeteria, and in social interactions. Ken Pransky (2008) writes, "Even if these students' home and community language is not English, they are surrounded by English when they turn on the TV, listen to music, play video games, or go into the broader community. Children learn BICS quickly as it is embedded in the direct physical and social activity they most enjoy" (p. 42).

Whereas Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) differs greatly from social language; it requires receptive and productive skills that are tied to academic thinking and reasoning (Carasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996). It is the English of instruction, of academic texts, for understanding content, and of learning. It is characterized by more complex sentence structures and a very rich, multisyllabic vocabulary. The focus is on the content to be learned, not on the language used to teach content. While there are certainly many elements of BICS in classroom language, they are overshadowed by the importance of CALP. Cummins (1979) found that everyday conversational language could be acquired in two years while the more complex language abilities needed to cope with the curriculum could take five to seven or more years to develop. Teachers may misperceive ESL students or ELLs' academic ability or effort because they do not discriminate between BICS and CALP. In Krashen's sense, BICS is acquired because all children naturally acquire BICS, while CALP must be explicitly taught. Therefore, it is extremely important and critical that ESL students are given equal opportunities to develop their CALP skills and be exposed to the academic content covered by their same-age peers.

Cummins' (1980) second theory related to bilingual education develops the notion that academic competence can be developed in the first language (L1). Research has suggested that it is wrong to assume that the brain has only a limited amount of room for language skills. Some believe that just like an expanding balloon, our brains can hold only so much, and if we fill it too fully with the heritage language, there will be no room for English. This misconception leads parents and teachers to advocate arresting development of the native language to leave ample room for the new language (Tse, 2001, p. 45). Language learning research suggests the opposite. A student who knows how to use a dictionary, study for a test, and take notes in one language can, to a large extent, transfer these same skills to a second language. Background knowledge can be learned in any language. Cummins (1980, 1981) proposes the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model, in which he uses the metaphor of an iceberg with two peaks sticking above the water. At first glance, it appears that the peaks are separate icebergs, but actually they share a common base (Adamson, 2005). As Baker (2006) summarizes, "Irrespective of the language in which a person is operating, the thoughts that accompany talking, reading, writing, and listening come from the same central engine" (p. 169). When a person owns two languages, there is one integrated source of thought (Nemser, 1971).

It is true that ELLs can develop some aspects of academic language in their first language while they are learning English. However, it is very important that students in bilingual programs do not fall behind in background knowledge of content areas if they study these subjects only in their first language. Not every skill transfers. Highly developed reading skills in the first language (L1) help learning to read in the second language (L2), but they are obviously not enough. The ELL has limited English vocabulary and is not secure in many syntactic and

rhetorical patterns. The student needs to develop effective strategies to deal with difficult and partially understood material.

The area of ESL education suggests that for ESL students, just as for native English speaking students, English-language learning should take place in conjunction with the learning of academic content (Donato, 1994). Therefore, it is neither necessary nor desirable to postpone or simplify academic instruction until students are proficient English language users. As Delpit states with regard to native English speakers, "Literacy is not something you can teach apart from literate behavior. You don't learn to read; you learn to read something, and you read something because you want to know something, enjoy a text, or participate in a group…" (Teale, 1991, as cited in Watts-Taffe & Truscott 2000, p. 260).

Every learning task ought to require learners to think regardless of their language proficiency level. As Burkett and Landon (2004) explain, "When teachers are faced with learners struggling to learn through the medium of a language with which they are only partly familiar, they often simplify the tasks. While this may seem like a logical step, it does not help the child to develop cognitively." The challenge is to start off with simpler tasks, and then to ensure that these tasks become progressively more challenging. This notion correlates to Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of the Proximal Development (ZPD) which purports that students learn better when they perform tasks under teacher guidance where the tasks become gradually more challenging, placing cognitive demand on the student (Vygotsky, 1987). However, we cannot simply increase the cognitive demand without providing some assistance or "scaffolding." Watts-Taffe and Truscott (2000) define scaffolds as intentional ways of assisting students in experiencing successful task completion. Activating students' background knowledge, developing vocabulary and fostering communicative interaction are scaffolds which should be incorporated into

instruction to help students learn the language and content while increasing the demand and providing support for them to successfully accomplish cognitively challenging tasks. With such preparation, they are eventually able to successfully perform grade level tasks independently.

As mentioned earlier, Cummins suggested that different contexts require different kinds of language competence- Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). While CALP, academically demanding language, is context-reduced, BICS is context-embedded language which is academically undemanding. By taking into account the role of language in materials and pedagogic and social processes in the classroom (Cooke, 1998), teachers support their students in the move from performing cognitively demanding but contextualized texts to those that involve higher-order thought processing in decontextualized situations (Bailey, Burkett & Freeman, 2007). Teachers must provide support for constructing meaning in cognitively demanding tasks, and then once language is well-established and the process familiar, they can progress to context-reduced tasks (Fu, 1995).

It is also important to bear in mind the close connection between thinking and language. As Russian psychologist Vygotsky stated, language is not identical to thinking, but it is a tool for thinking (Burkett & Landon, 2004). In other words, we use language to think and then we express such thoughts in language, so it is a cyclical process. As introduced by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) and researched by Goldenberg (1992), all students benefit from instructional discussions because they offer opportunities to second- language learners to use language as a tool for increased proficiency and provide them with the means to construct new knowledge (Gavalek & Raphael, 1996), which is aligned with Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of language in cognitive development. In classrooms that are dominated by worksheets and little instructional

interaction, all students suffer; however, ESL students are at double disadvantage. Truscott and Watts-Taffe (1998) found that there were fewer opportunities for linguistically diverse students to engage in extended language use. While teachers talk, ESL students often sit silently and do not participate in classroom discussion. This situation impedes students' language and academic development (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Typical classroom language follows a pattern where teachers initiate the conversation, students respond, and the teachers evaluate students' responses. This model of classroom language was referred to by Mehan (1979) as IRE (initiate, response, evaluate). The problem with IRE is the dominance of teacher talk and its narrow framework that does not encourage students to use the language to learn. In contrast, instructional interactions offer opportunities for students to learn through the use of language

In a lesson using the instructional conversations format, students have an important stake in what is being said. This ownership in the dialogue can increase motivation and interest in learning on the part of the students involved (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). The teaching elements of instructional conversations include focus of direction, activation and use of background and relevant schemata, direct teaching, promotion of more complex language and expression, and elicitation of bases for statements and positions. This method also generates more discussion since it centers on questions and answers for which there might be more than one correct answer.

Instructional interactions not only promote connections, but they also activate background knowledge and relevant schemata which lead to the production of complex language and expressions. The instructional interaction format also reduces single-worded answers, creating a non-threatening but challenging environment where the student constructs his or her knowledge through the use of language. Learners have to be actively engaged in talking,

listening, reading, and viewing in order to effectively acquire language skills. This model of instructional conversation becomes critical in the learning process of linguistically diverse students. However, in order for this model to be effective, it is important that teachers should be cognizant of the students' language proficiency level and continually encourage students to participate.

In order for successful language acquisition to take place, it is important not only to consider output, but also the environment and the input available to learners in a classroom. Krashen (1985) maintains that our progress of learning a language is furthered when we are exposed to (interacting with) language input that is at our level of understanding. If the input is sufficient, the necessary grammar is automatically provided, and the learner proceeds through a natural process of acquisition. For Krashen, the classroom is important because it offers the learner access to meaningful language. From such meaningful language, the learner builds approximative language systems (Nemser, 1971) or interlanguages (Selinker, 1972) in which the learner incorporates elements of the first and second languages as well as elements that are not part of their first language (L1) or second language (L2) to use in interactions with native English speakers in order to acquire the other elements of their L2. However, there are many questions as to what comprehensible language is and how teachers should modify their language. Some researchers (Kleifgen, 1985; Wong Fillmore, 1985) suggest that, ideally, input is adjusted by teachers according to feedback provided by learners. Adjustments include the reduction of speed and complexity of speech; increasing repetition, pausing, and comprehension checks; and contextualizing abstract concepts through the use of realia. This can include maps, photos, and graphic organizers such as webbing, all of which have been identified as making input as raw material for language learning (Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Krashen, 1981; Short, 1991; Wong

Fillmore, 1985). These adjustments have been shown to be integral to creating an effective instructional environment and in ensuring input that is comprehensible to nonnative speakers (Tikunoff 1985; Wong Filmore, 1989). It must be added that the usefulness of input is not solely a result of quantity. Rather, effective input also has an authentic communicative purpose, emphasizing the content of the message rather than its grammatical form (Krashen, 1981; Lambert, 1984; Tikunoff, 1985; Widdowsson 1978; Wong Fillmore, 1985).

However, while Long (1983), agrees that input is important, he argues that acquisition results not from comprehension, but from interaction. He maintains (Long, 1981, 1983) that negotiation involving two-way communication is essential. Swain (1985), on the other hand, contends that production, not comprehension, may move the learner to attend to and therefore acquire grammatical proficiency in a language. Comprehensible output (the production of language that is comprehensible to native speakers) allows learners to test hypotheses about the language system and to move to more grammatically accurate output. Ellis (1988) offers yet a different conclusion. After reviewing numerous studies on the relationship between learner participation and second language acquisition, he concludes that results are mixed. It is not clear whether participation causes acquisition or whether acquisition causes participation.

These theories form the backdrop to the following discussion of my experience with Hispanic ELL's both in a self-contained ESL class and as a co-teacher in a mainstream class. If we are to support ELL's in achieving academic success, we need to be aware of what constitutes best practice and to ensure that our classroom practice reflects it.

Chapter 4

Experiences in the Classroom

In this section of the paper I will describe my experience with English language learners. I will refer to the theoretical discussion of the previous section as I try to analyze what appeared to support their learning and what hindered it.

a. Experience in a self-contained ESL classroom

In my ESL classroom, one of my goals was to make language transparent to all my students. I was aware that the "contexts in the mind" as Cazden (1988) called them were constructed by participants through interaction (Erikson & Schultz 1981) and experience. Such meaning making required skillful guessing since words themselves do not have fixed meanings, but arrive at them from how and when they are used (Gee, 1990). According to Bailey, Burkett and Freeman (2007), "The problem is that these meanings are not transparent for a number of reasons. Academic work requires a level of vocabulary and sophisticated grammar and discourse skills that second language learners often do not fully gauge" (p. 610). In my students' case, they were not fully proficient in either English or Spanish. Additionally, the students had a double learning load; they had to not only learn new content, but also the complex linguistics systems that were used to convey the subject matter (Merrienboer & Pass, 1998 as cited in Bailey, Burkett & Freeman, 2007, p. 610). As I spoke, I always scanned students' faces for signs of comprehension or confusion. A part of my whiteboard was designated as a word wall where I would post the weekly vocabulary that was determined by the district for each grade. I would also write down other unfamiliar vocabulary words as they came up in our discussions. Such

adjustments have been shown to be integral to creating an effective instructional environment for ELLs and in ensuring input that is comprehensible.

I also tried to create opportunities for students to interact and participate. My bilingual aid and I would divide the class into small groups which allowed greater opportunities for interaction and spoken output. Small groups were especially useful and effective for students who were shy or less confident in their speaking ability.

Even though there were not any students who were native speakers of English, students constantly spoke English to me and one another. The bilingual aid also spoke English to students; the only time she would revert to Spanish was when students needed clarification. Most of my students were born in the United States, so they were orally proficient and did not have difficulty in expressing themselves verbally. Interestingly, the striking difference between the mainstream and self-contained ESL classroom was the frequency of Spanish used by the Hispanic students. It seemed that the ESL students in the self-contained ESL classroom actually interacted with one another in English more so than they did in the mainstream language arts class. I believe the reason for this was not only because I showed genuine interest in learning Spanish, but I also often asked my students the Spanish cognates for words they did not understand, and tried to include aspects of their own culture. In the classroom, teacher background is a significant factor that affects student success. Most teachers are from Euro-American, middle-class backgrounds with cultures that differ from those of most English language learners, yet teacher preparation institutions rarely train teacher candidates in strategies for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students (Zeichner, 1993; Crawford, 1993). At Sam Houston Junior School, the mainstream teachers' in general demonstrated a lack of interest in Spanish and Hispanic culture; very few teachers incorporated the students' cultural

background or experiences into the lessons. The emotional climate is of extreme importance in fostering academic progress. A lack of affirmation of their culture and identity can hinder the success of the ESL student.

During instruction, I made a great effort to call on every student several times. Most often, my students displayed the tendency to give one word answers or to give very short responses, but I always asked questions that required them to provide further explanation. I frequently asked "known answer" questions, one of the elements of instructional conversation adapted by Goldenberg (1992) in order to generate discussion.

Since they were in a classroom with students who were more or less at the same level, they felt comfortable and not afraid to make mistakes, so they did give extended responses. However, once they moved from ESL to mainstream classes, some of the shy or less confident students, who had flourished in the ESL classroom kept silent in the mainstream language arts class unless the teacher called on them. Even when they were individually addressed, they gave one-word responses. The differences were discouraging, especially as the intent of moving ELLs into mainstream classes was so that they would interact more naturally in English; however, the move resulted in the opposite effect.

Students in my ESL classroom were exposed to a variety of written material since I taught all the types of writing required by the district-wide curriculum. Students received rich and plentiful experiences with written output and wrote in a variety of genres. I never skipped or simplified the written assignments that each grade had to complete. I simply extended the time allocated to completing the assignments and created multiple opportunities for students to compose written work that prepared them for both the district-wide curriculum-based

assessments and the acquisition of higher order thinking skills and advanced writing skills necessary for high school and college level courses.

In order for learning to take place, teacher must present students with tasks that require thinking and that challenge their existing knowledge. While language can be an obstacle in students' learning, teachers should keep in mind Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD. With support, my students would eventually be able to successfully perform grade level tasks independently.

I never simplified my ESL students' curriculum-based assessments, believing that if I expected less of my students, they would not acquire the necessary skills to be successful in their grade level. They were given assessments that all students at that grade level were expected to do, so there was no reason why my ESL students were not capable of doing these assessments when they were taught the necessary skills. I simply provided the scaffolds that would assist my students to complete the tasks successfully. For example, while teaching how to compose a persuasive essay, I provided a framework for a five paragraph persuasive essay, and showed them samples of essays that varied from weak to strong. My students also produced multiple drafts that also helped them to learn the style of persuasion. I adopted a process approach to writing, as opposed to the firmly controlled process adopted by the mainstream teachers in which the focus was on form rather than meaning.

As Valdes (1999) determined in her research, newly arrived students taught by mainstream teachers who valued their knowledge and different cultural experiences revealed a growing control of written English style. This was in contrast to students did not flourish as much taught when taught by teachers using a very controlled writing process in which they determined the topics and the vocabulary to be used. By focusing on ELL's as resources,

teachers validate the students' knowledge and experiences and make them part of the educational process (Short, 1999). This is what I strived to do in all aspects of my teaching; I always gave my students the freedom to choose their topics in order to create motivation to write about something that was relevant to their lives. I provided a framework for my students when composing a piece of written work, but I valued and incorporated their ideas into the writing lessons. Showing various samples of weak and well-written essays and my focus on writing multiple drafts helped students to differentiate between oral and written styles for different purposes. They produced well-written work in different genres and made significant progress. In fact, until that year, Sam Houston had never experienced such a high percentage of ESL students pass the seventh grade TAKS writing test.

Although I experienced many successes, I encountered different challenges and problems in the self-contained ESL classroom, most of which were faced over and over again by my eighth-graders. Their low standardized scores in reading kept them from exiting the ESL program and caused them to remain in the separate world of ESL for the remaining years of junior high school. At Sam Houston Junior School, the previous ESL classes were taught by a native Spanish speaker who had a weak command of English and had students do nothing but coloring and cutting activities. There was no attempt to disentangle the effects of various factors on test scores, such as developing students' receptive skills in listening and reading as well as their productive skills in speaking and teaching them metacognitive strategies.

In my ESL self-contained classroom, I attached great importance to developing my students' cognitive academic language proficiency by explicitly teaching the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of the language to express the higher order thinking skills. I weaved activities into my classes that encouraged students' reasoning ability, such as forming

hypotheses, making inferences, analyzing situations, justifying opinions, and predicting future events while providing language support to promote student communication about content, in oral and written form. My ESL students gained great success on the TAKS reading and writing tests as a result of this approach.

Even though our self-contained ESL class was not academically different from the mainstream language classes, there still existed a feeling of isolation that was prevalent in ESL students, especially in my eighth grade students since they had been in the ESL track the longest. Separation from native speakers in language arts classes fostered the feeling of intellectual inferiority. What I observed school-wide was that subject-matter teachers though they were ESL certified and had ESL students in their classes saw their language learners as the exclusive concern of ESL teachers. For instance, a math teacher sent two of my ESL students to my class, so I could help them solve math problems because the math teacher simply did not want to work with them. The students were, in fact, competent in math but just needed additional language support in learning concepts. However, she treated the matter as a special problem that needed to be handled solely by the ESL teacher. Such attitudes towards ESL students strengthened the feelings of alienation and negatively affected the overall climate of the school.

b. Experience as a Co-teacher in the Mainstream Classroom

When officials from Region 4 of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (the body that guides and monitors activities and programs related to public education in Texas) visited Sam Houston to monitor the ESL program and ESL students, they were surprised to see that many were in classes taught by teachers who were not ESL certified as mandated by law. In its attempts to limit the exposure to liability, the district came up with a quick solution: to list my

name down as the lead teacher of the students in the ESL classes. I was still the co-teacher but appeared as the lead teacher which absolved the school on paper.

When I was assigned as a co-teacher, the school did not provide any kind of training for my new position. Neither the lead teachers nor I knew what I was to do in the classroom, so this created a situation open to misunderstandings; some teachers saw me providing a way to avoid their responsibilities, sit at their desks and surf the internet while I taught, and others preferred to use me to monitor students, i.e. classroom management. It was clear that removing the self-contained ESL and adopting the co-teach model was a money-saving solution for the district's financial woes.

Later, as the lead teachers and I adjusted to the situation and came to know each other and our teaching styles, we did develop a plan as to what my function would be in the classroom. I did not want to be a mere monitor; I wanted to hone my skills as a practitioner. So I did have a commensurate level of teaching. The lead teachers and I would divide the lecturing and carrying out of the class activities. At times I would also pull out students to help them catch up with the content material if they were absent, or I would administer tests. Most of the students I helped in class were ESL students who were struggling. I provided support by rewording instruction to make it more comprehensible or highlighted key words in texts. I also specifically pulled out ESL students to give them extended time to complete complex activities. However, most of the time the lead teacher and I taught collaboratively. I always used different strategies to include all ESL students in classroom discussions and made an effort to produce comprehensible language in my lectures accompanied with visual aids. Although the arrangement worked, I was not able to do everything I would have done had I had my own classroom.

One of the flaws that I witnessed on a regular basis was the inconsistent routines of the spoken language use in the mainstream classroom. Most of the discussions conducted were predominantly "teacher-led" as Applebee (1981) defines. However, the copious input ESL students received from the teacher could be considered beneficial since the input had an authentic communicative purpose, emphasizing the content of the message rather than its grammatical form. A notion that is put forward by Krashen (1981) as valuable for second language acquisition. The target language served a communicative need since it was the medium through which concepts were articulated and thus provided the ESL students with ample opportunity to be exposed to English, which was fortunate as Spanish dominated their speech the minute they stepped out of the classroom. But, at times, in an extreme attempt to assist their comprehension, the mainstream teacher would also simplify or dumb down the instruction and the tasks to a point which would not meet the standards of their grade level and did not help them to develop cognitively.

There was also the case in some mainstream classes where, despite the considerable number of ESL students, the teacher would mainly address the native speakers of English and would seldom adjust her speech to make it comprehensible to her ESL students. Adjustments to make the input comprehensible were conspicuously absent in some of the mainstream classrooms.

In a study conducted to determine effective instruction for ESL students in mainstream classrooms, Truscott and Watts-Taffe (1998) found that there were fewer opportunities for linguistically diverse students to engage in extended language use. Instructional interactions, usually missing from mainstream classrooms, offer opportunities for students to learn through the use of language. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of ZPD, mentioned earlier, is an important

concept that relates to the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what a child can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. Working within ZPD allows the student to develop skills they will then use independently - developing higher order-thinking skills that ESL student need for college-readiness. Although I felt my students were at a disadvantage in the reorganization of the program, I was able to incorporate cooperative learning activities where less competent students were paired up with a more capable peer. Such activities not only fostered team work, but also encouraged less confident students to be more engaged and active.

Of course, mainstream classrooms cannot solely be evaluated as language acquisition environments where input is received. They should also provide opportunities for output and facilitate the entire cycle of interaction. The productive use of second language and feedback from native speakers is integral to the process of second language acquisition (SLA). This corresponds to the importance that Swain attaches to the role of output, as outlined in Chapter 3. Since my students exclusively communicated in Spanish outside the classroom, creating opportunities to interact with native speakers in the classroom was important for them. Opportunities varied according to the nature of the activities, but most of the classes were teacher-led featuring the IRE sequence (Mehan, 1979) in which the teacher initiated the conversation, students responded, and teacher evaluated the students' responses, thus making extended classroom discussion a rarity. Also, ESL students were deemed "low" (Harklau 1994) and therefore, placed in low-track mainstream classes, which consisted of students low in ability, on the assumption that classes would be easier for newly-exited ESL students to cope since most of them were unable to demonstrate grade-level academic competence (Linquanti, 2001). In those classes, activities were heavily teacher- directed and relied on seat work, such as students

working on a packet of worksheets that consisted of below- grade level work. In contrast, in high-track classes (Pre-Advancement classes), there was more interaction, fostered by activities such as student-led group work. As class time was dominated by worksheets and very little instructional interaction in the low-track classes, all students suffered; however, ESL students, in particular, were at a double disadvantage. The large class sizes (up to 35) and the time constraints faced by the teacher to cover the material made it very difficult to facilitate classroom interactions. As a result, the teacher would elicit answers using the IRE sequence or would direct questions to the entire class, reducing interaction to a single answer. This allowed less confident students simply not to respond and instead favored the more outgoing students, enabling them to loudly or confidently dominate the discussion. Because they were seldom required to participate, ESL students would sit silently and tune out. This situation seriously negated the importance of output and opportunities for interaction with native speakers. They rarely had the opportunity to produce extended, coherent discourse within a single turn in which they could manipulate tense usage and other grammar components.

Even though I was present in all classes, my position as a co-teacher did not allow me to interfere with the learning and teaching that occurred in the mainstream classroom. Since the mainstream teachers lacked specific training in strategies for teaching ESL students, they varied considerably in whether or not their instructional style facilitated instructional interaction with the ESL students. While some mainstream teachers had placed the ESL students in the front of the room to scan students' faces for comprehension, the teacher was more likely to elicit output from the native or the more capable speakers. It seemed that they did this to spare the students from being put on the spot, so the net result was students being withdrawn and non-interactive in mainstream classes.

With respect to written output, students would produce different types of genre for curriculum-based assessments which were given every six weeks. Before each assessment, they would learn the traits of that particular genre and were given opportunities to compose their own written work. However, the teacher had very low expectations for her ESL students; the written work they produced was below grade level and lacked original thought. The teacher would provide a basic framework to an extent where the students would simply have to complete the blanks with a single word or phrase. Even though the curriculum incorporated different types of genre that required high order thinking skills, most of the time students did nothing more than locate and repeat information verbatim from textbooks. ESL students became extremely adept at locating information in texts and repeating it in answer to factual questions, often with a partial understanding of the information they were copying or memorizing. The quality of writing experiences offered to ESL students was not consistent across the mainstream classes. As stated previously, ESL students were mostly assigned to mainstream classes that consisted of native speakers who were below grade level. Therefore, the mainstream language arts teacher did not demand high quality written work from either group, despite the high-level district wide writing standards. The teacher did not modify these activities to make them achievable, but, instead she simplified them to the students' detriment. In doing so, she was hoping to help these students, but in reality she was doing them a disservice which hindered their access to age-appropriate academic content. Such approaches adopted by teachers who are not trained to work with ELLs can result in irreparable deficits in these students' learning that unfortunately affect their entire future.

Although most writing activities entailed the transfer of information from textbooks, literary texts, or other written sources, there was considerable variation across classes in the

frequency and original thought required by assignments. While Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) students learned to produce academically-valued genres where they would need to form a personal opinion supported by a synthesis of information, the written work composed by ESL students in the regular mainstream classrooms did not challenge them; the cognitive demand placed on these students was low and thus did not push them to develop their writing skills and excel.

At Sam Houston, students read copiously; lead teachers incorporated Sustained Silent Reading into class time and library visits were quite frequent; students were encouraged to check out and read books according to their proficiency level. Although input in the form of reading was plentiful, it lacked in variety and level of difficulty. Textbooks were the predominant source of reading matter for most students. Students would frequently take practice tests in order to prepare for the state mandated reading and writing tests (this writing test is only administered in the seventh grade). Most of the time these students were not able to pass the test, so they were referred to remedial TAKS classes where they received additional instruction and preparation for the test. Unfortunately, despite these remedial classes, most students still failed the reading test and/or writing test.

The three constituencies- ESL teachers, bilingual and general classroom teachers- are all trained to adopt a particular view of the role of language in instruction. ESL teachers focus primarily on their students' acquisition of the English language skills (at times to the reduction of classroom content); bilingual teachers focus on the home or community languages as a vehicle to academic content, with the idea that content can be learned and potentially transferred from one language to another; and classroom teachers focus on grade-level or subject-specific content, often with very little attention to the linguistic medium in which they are teaching. In conclusion,

everybody has a piece of the content/language puzzle, but no one sees or addresses the whole picture (Freeman, 2008, p. 17).

Chapter 5

School and Family

This chapter is based on my students' own accounts in out-of-class discussions and interviews. It is intended to provide a better understanding as to how their culture and family backgrounds greatly impact these third and fourth generation Hispanic students' lives in and after school.

Ninety-nine percent of my students were of Mexican origin; most of them were born in the U.S. or arrived here at a very young age and still struggled with English. They performed more poorly on the statewide academic tests than any other group. There are a variety of factors that could be attributed to their low academic achievement, some of which were independent of their experience in ESL. Other problems that affected their school performance were rooted in their immigration background, in their movement back and forth across the border, and the specific cultural characteristics of the families who choose to migrate (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Family income and educational background are important in determining language learning success and afford various benefits. For instance, students from high income families may have more educational resources at home, such as books and reference materials. More access to educational resources makes it easier for children to develop better literacy skills that aid them in both academic performance and language acquisition (Tse, 2001). Unfortunately, most of my students were economically disadvantaged children who were at-risk of dropping out of school due to retention at grade level and failure to graduate (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Secada et al., 1998; Waggoner, 1999). In some cases, the only decent meal they would

have the entire day would be the free or reduced- price lunch served at school. Both parents worked two jobs and struggled to make a living. Some of them did not even have a permanent address; they would frequently relocate to different apartment complexes that offered the first month rent free. Almost all of my students lived in insulated and isolated communities of Raytown where they had almost no contact with the English-speaking world. It is a fact that those who are of higher income tend to have more connections with the English-speaking world outside of their cultural community (Tse, 2001). My students lived in the poor parts of town or in trailer park communities where gang-violence and crime were usual occurrences. Most of my students and their families led a difficult life. Under such circumstances, it was unrealistic for some of them to make education a priority. Also, most of them came from uneducated families; some parents were illiterate, making it difficult for them to be actively involved in their child's schooling. Some of them attached a different value to education, which made it difficult to create the desire in these students to attend college and motivate them to create a better future for themselves when all they thought of was to find a job as soon as they could in order to support their families. However, there were parents that supported their child's schooling in the hope that their child would be able to build a better life for him or herself.

Another reason why my students had failed to become proficient in English by middle school is because they all had come from bilingual programs which provided instruction almost exclusively in Spanish. They had spent many school years sitting in classes taught not in English but in Spanish, so low academic achievement in junior high school and high school should not have come as a surprise. Bilingual programs were set up to assist students from non-English-speaking homes by providing them with instruction in which students would learn how to read and write in Spanish while gradually transitioning to English. However, in a substantial number

of these classes students remained more or less indefinitely, since they did not learn enough English to transition out of them. These bilingual programs aimed to help Hispanic students preserve their heritage language while learning English, but unfortunately, it turned out to be an ineffective approach. I believe these bilingual programs, which in essence were not truly bilingual, kept my sixth grade ESL students ethnically isolated and deprived them of learning English language skills and have undeniably created a serious gap which will affect their entire academic lives.

Another reason why many Hispanics have been slow at becoming fluent in English is because of their strong attachment to the Spanish language due to the huge numbers of Spanish speakers living in the United States and to the strong concentration in certain areas. This is not true for all immigrants. For example, Turkish people living in New York can find few places outside their home where they can function speaking only Turkish. In contrast, Hispanics in Los Angeles and Houston and Cubans in Miami can function entirely in Spanish. Thus, relying upon Spanish and using English only when absolutely necessary is a cultural choice. But it is a choice that may have a serious cost in limiting the ability of children to function at a high educational level in the U.S.

Hispanic immigrants in general and Mexicans in particular also stand out in another way, and that is their uncertainty in making the United States their permanent home. Based on the countless conversations I have had with my ESL students and Hispanic colleagues, it is my understanding that they seem to be much more reluctant about making a long-lasting commitment to living in the States and thus are more resistant to assimilation. Also, many of the Mexican families that immigrate to the United States lack educational qualifications and as a result, work in unskilled jobs that do not require the knowledge of English. They also seem to be

more determined than other immigrants to keep their mother tongue alive. They seem to see the move to the United States as a temporary, pragmatic choice, and they hold on to the option of returning to the country they still consider "home". A great many of them live a short distance from the Mexican border- in Southern California, South Texas, Arizona, or New Mexico. Even those farther away geographically remain psychologically closer to their home country than do most immigrants. All these reasons make it plausible to expect that their children will not embrace English as enthusiastically as other immigrant youths (Tse, 2001). The tight-knit friendship among my Hispanic students created a safety net which insulated them from the "white kids," as they would call the non-Hispanic kids. In my classroom and in the hallways of Sam Houston, I observed an obvious barrier between the Hispanic students and the native speakers. From many discussions I have had with my students, they expressed how comfortable they felt together and how they watched out for each other because they shared the same language and culture. These small social groups reflected their life outside of school. Even though these students were born in the U.S. and attended school here all their lives, they strongly identified themselves with the Mexican culture. Their binders were decorated with stickers of Mexican flags, and they wore bracelets that had the national colors.

There was a class activity in particular that made me further reflect and question my values as an educator who aims to teach these ESL students English, content and skills that are necessary for them to be successful in the American society. In one of my seventh grade classes, students were handed out papers that had a speech bubble in which they were to complete the sentence, "I have a dream one day that…." and then they were to draw pictures illustrating their dream. There were two striking examples of dreams that were not directly linked to America. This upset the lead teacher, and pushed me to delve deeper into identity and culture. One student

wrote his dream was to move back to Mexico and become president. When I asked about some of the things he would do if he were to become president of Mexico, he replied that he would free the country from the drug cartels and pass laws that would bring social justice. The other student wrote he would like to be the next Cesar Chavez. He told me that he would like to work further to improve migrant workers' working conditions and rights. Both students colored their work in red, green, and white. These dreams were all voiced in Dr. Martin Luther King's eloquent speech; however, these dreams were not necessarily within the American context. When viewed from the point of integration, it could be a refusal, but it may also be regarded as a form of survival for them. They were simply drawing upon their own cultural background which made them feel proud, comfortable and to which they felt they belonged. I wondered whether their desire to maintain their cultural identity could also be one of the causes for them not to gain proficiency in the English language, and thus, struggle throughout their academic lives and not fully contribute to our society.

With respect to academic performance, the really serious gap is not only at the point of transition from junior high to high school or even at the transition from high school to college. The serious academic gap is seen in the low numbers of Latinos graduating from college (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Latinos are not behind other groups in rates of college entry, but they are much less successful in remaining in college long enough to earn a degree. The high college dropout rate of Latinos is not surprising given the low level of academic skills that they demonstrate on the state mandated tests throughout high school. In recent decades, America's colleges and universities have made enormous efforts to attract Latino applicants, but none have found a solution to overcome the glaring imbalance in the levels of academic achievement that exist at the end of high school.

There are cultural characteristics, historical, and demographic reasons as to why Hispanics do not fare well academically. Nonetheless, these barriers are not permanent and will erode in time. Hispanics have made enormous educational progress in the past generation. The longer Hispanic families stay in America, the better they do in school because they start to see the trade-off between earning wages immediately and deferring full-time work until the completion of college or a postgraduate program.

Chapter 6

Recommendations and Conclusions

As I ruminate over which practices were advantageous and which ones were disadvantageous in the ESL self-contained classroom versus the mainstream classroom, I can undoubtedly say both afforded students a variety of experiences that both supported and hindered their language development. The mainstream classes provided students with rich linguistic interactions through the written mode, but there were some limitations. Though students composed many pieces of written work in different genres, the level of work that was expected from my ESL students was not rigorous and did not match grade level expectations. The lead teacher simplified many of the assignments and curriculum-based assessments that students were required to produce. Such practices hindered ESL students from improving their academic language proficiency, to which their underachievement and failure in school could be partly attributed. The academic genres students produced did not reflect the higher order thinking skills that were heavily emphasized across the board in the Harris County CISD wide curriculum as per the state's curriculum standards and that Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) required.

In order for students to develop the English-language proficiency required to achieve in school, the focus and primary objective of ESL programs in middle school and high school must be the development of academic language. Explicit attention must be given to developing students' receptive and productive skills (Valdes, 2001). Low-track mainstream language arts classes in which ESL students are placed will not help develop their academic language

proficiency. The most effective classes for ESL students are the ones that integrate both language and content.

In order to implement an effective program for the ELL population, whether the district adopts the sheltered approach or chooses to mainstream them, several elements need to be part of a comprehensive school or district wide plan. These include a vision for the success of all students, including ELL students; a well-articulated program design that focuses on the development of both language skills and content knowledge; and an organizational structure where learning is reinforced through multiple venues, extended time, and adequate professional development for faculty. This way, both language and subject area teachers are able to integrate language development with content learning.

Teaching ELLs is less and less a specialized responsibility; their instruction is now increasingly shared by all teachers (Freeman, 2008, p.13). In my opinion, the fact was that lead teachers with whom I taught saw themselves as strictly language arts teachers, responsible only for the native speakers, and this created a disadvantage for the ESL students. True collaboration between the mainstream and ESL teachers at Sam Houston Junior School could have only taken place if the Harris County CISD had sincerely valued its ESL population; they could have made provision for interdisciplinary teams of ESL and content-area teachers to work together to adopt effective practices when they made the decision to mainstream ESL students. As classrooms are becoming more and more richly diverse both ethnically and linguistically across the U.S., every educator needs to consider the needs of ESL students. As noted by Hanscombe (1989), all teachers need to think of themselves as English-as-a-second-language teachers. Mainstream teachers need to work collaboratively with the ESL teacher to reach an understanding of and

sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of each context as language learning environments (Harklau, 1994).

As Freeman (2008) points out,

> We must understand "teaching in the context of English-language learners" as a general educational practice and an-evenly-distributed professional responsibility. ELL's represent an increasing student presence, and all teachers need to better understand what this distribution of educational responsibility demands of them, what it means to learners, and how it shapes our classrooms, schools and communities. (p. 18-19)

As teachers, we have to work together to accommodate our culturally and linguistically diverse students. An equitable education is only possible when our schools fulfill their dual obligation to teach English and provide access to academic-content instruction to all students (Valdes, 2001).

Underlying these classroom factors is an even more fundamental problem- the lack of articulated goals for these students or a plan to prepare them for higher education. Without clear goals, any improvement in the education of ELLs is bound to be elusive. Yet, it is very common for districts and states to have no particular program goals other than to close the achievement gap (Callahan & Gandara, 2008). In order to accomplish this, regardless of what type of program ELL's attend, students need to gain academic English proficiency. Understanding the role of language in academic content has become a central feature in teaching; it has to inform curriculum and lesson planning, and it has to shape instruction (Freeman, 2008). As long as these programs for secondary ELLs are not driven by explicit academic goals and curriculum remains

haphazard and dependent upon whatever local resources are readily available, the goal for these long-term ELL students will simply be drop-out prevention and high school graduation (Callahan & Gandara, 2008). If and when ELL's graduate from high school and are prepared to enter higher education, it is almost always as a result of a program initiated by an individual or a group expressly interested in the academic achievement of ELL's, rather than a systematic change in the larger school structure (Spalding, Carolino & Amen, 2004 as cited in Callahan & Gandara, 2008, p. 111).

The issues that I have addressed in this paper are not only experienced in Harris County CISD, but they are issues that concern the entire country. Language education for English language learners has been a historically and politically controversial topic which neither federal nor state government has handled consistently. The federal government's changing attitudes toward minority languages have led to many changes to bilingual education and ESL programs. It is clear that while the federal government should monitor state bilingual and ESL programs within a policy framework, school districts should have the freedom to design and adopt their own language program with well-articulated academic goals according to their students' needs. School mandates and local policies that are currently dissolving bilingual education and ESL education due to shrinking financial resources, as well as federal policies that mandate assessment of all students, including ELLs, must provide access to the academic content in order for English-language learners to be educationally successful (Freeman, 2008).

The demographics of the United States make it abundantly clear that most teachers already or shortly will teach classes that combine students who are ELLs at various stages of fluency with other students who are already fluent in English. Since teaching ELLs has become a

widespread feature of education in the U.S. today, it requires a shift in how educators conceive academic content, teach it, and assess it.

As educators, we need to address the pressing issues of ELLs and the different types of language programs and methodologies at our educational institutions. Our common goal should be to create ways in which our ELLs achieve success in the American educational setting and thus, contribute fully to our society. In order to achieve this goal, it is crucial that the federal government, states, school districts, communities and educators understand that it is a shared responsibility which requires drastic changes in our educational system. Furthermore, it is extremely important that we all work together towards making the changes that are absolutely necessary to improve our ELL's educational experience and creating support systems that will enable them to reach their potential and fulfill their dreams of a brighter future.

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