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## Supporting EL Student Success during an Intervention Block

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## Supporting EL Student Success during an Intervention Block

### Abstract:

*Learning both language and content simultaneously is a challenge for all English Learner (EL) students, especially those with very low proficiency. In public elementary school settings, classroom teachers have traditionally taught content, while EL teachers have taught language. In this practitioner inquiry project, an EL teacher explores strategies for collaborating with a mainstream classroom teacher to teach both language and content to low proficiency second grade EL students during an EL intervention block.*

### Background

During the past decades, numbers of English learners (ELs) in U.S. public schools have been steadily increasing (NCES, 2021). At the same time there has been a move to include students from a variety of special populations into mainstream classrooms with only short periods of instruction from a specialist. For ELs, this instruction has historically been pull-out instruction, with an EL specialist removing the students from the mainstream classroom for a period of time to focus exclusively on English language learning (Wright, 2019). Recently, pull-out instruction has fallen out of favor because it places much of the responsibility for students' English language development on the EL teacher. WIDA (a consortium providing resources to support the success of ELs) has encouraged a turn toward the sharing of responsibility for ELs' language development among EL specialists, classroom teachers and other stakeholders (WIDA, 2020).

I am an elementary school EL teacher instructing students using the pull-out model. When I began this inquiry, I was dissatisfied with this model because I did not know what my students were learning with their classroom teachers, especially in their mainstream Language Arts classes. I believed my students would be more successful if I taught using a more collaborative model of instruction; however, moving from a completely pull-out model to one that was highly collaborative would have necessitated large-scale institutional change at my school that was not possible at the time. Therefore, I chose to engage in a practitioner inquiry project in which I began collaborating on a small scale. In this inquiry, I took steps toward a more collaborative model of instruction by working with a second grade teacher to co-plan and co-assess lessons for the ELs in her class with the lowest English language proficiency. In this paper I will describe the strategies I used to begin to establish a collaborative relationship with this classroom teacher. My aim is for my experience to serve as a model for other classroom and EL teachers using a pull-out model who wish to move toward a more collaborative model of EL instruction.

I began my position as the EL teacher at Creekside Academy<sup>1</sup> in fall 2019. Creekside Academy is a K-5 public charter school located in a large Michigan metropolitan area in a neighborhood with residents primarily from the Middle East, including countries such as Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Creekside Academy offers a traditional public school curriculum supplemented by daily Arabic lessons and attracts almost exclusively the children of Arabic-speaking immigrant families. During the 2020-2021 school year, Creekside Academy had a population of 400 students with 210 of these students classified as English Learners (ELs). At the time of this inquiry, and still to this day, I am the only EL teacher in the school.

In my role as EL teacher, I support students' academic language development. I use the pull-out method of instruction, providing daily English lessons to about forty of the school's lowest proficiency ELs by removing them from their mainstream classrooms and instructing them in small groups (Wright, 2019). Each day I teach a group of six students from each grade (K-5) during their grade level's 40-minute intervention block. My district requires me to teach using a commercially published newcomer EL curriculum, but I am also permitted to use supplemental materials at my discretion. Using pull-out instruction and a separate EL curriculum limits my awareness of what my students learn with their classroom teachers, hindering my ability to support students in acquiring the academic language they are using daily in their mainstream classrooms. I began the 2020-2021 school year with the intention of creating interventions that directly helped my ELs' to learn the language they used in mainstream Language Arts with their classroom teachers. To support this intention, I chose to conduct a small practitioner inquiry project (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). The following wondering guided my project: How can my pull-out EL instruction increase 2nd grade ELs' reading success in their mainstream Language Arts classes?

## **Literature Review**

I searched the online Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the WIDA website (WIDA, 2021) for peer-reviewed articles on strategies for EL and mainstream teacher collaboration, as well as the most effective practices to support ELs' academic language skills. The following questions guided my research: 1) How can mainstream and EL teachers collaborate to align instruction during mainstream classes and intervention blocks? 2) What interventions increase success for ELs in mainstream Language Arts classes?

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<sup>1</sup> All school, teacher and student names are pseudonyms

## **Teacher Collaboration**

There is significant evidence that collaboration between mainstream teachers and EL interventionists boosts ELs' learning. A fully collaborative model may include a reiterative cycle of co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing, and co-reflecting (WIDA, 2020). In this model, the classroom teacher focuses on content-area knowledge while the EL teacher emphasizes the vocabulary, grammatical structures and language functions used to convey content (Diaz-Rico, 2020; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2017). It is not necessary for all four pieces of the collaborative cycle to be implemented simultaneously. Often EL and mainstream teachers begin by co-planning and co-assessing, so ELs are taught mutually agreed upon standards, vocabulary and language structures. Elements essential to any sort of successful collaboration between mainstream and EL teachers include a desire to work together and time to co-plan and co-reflect, either through in-person or digital means (Calderon et al., 2020; Giles, 2018; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019; Vintan & Gallagher, 2019).

## **Language Arts Interventions**

According to large-scale studies of reading research, word level skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency are equally important for both EL and native-English speaker students who are learning to read (August & Shanahan, 2007; Calderón, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Mancilla-Martinez, 2020). However, simply building word-level reading skills is not sufficient for ELs, who often struggle to make meaning of written texts because reading comprehension requires not only word-level reading skills, but also language comprehension skills (Mancilla-Martinez, 2020).

Several strategies have been shown to improve reading comprehension for ELs: one important strategy is the intensive teaching of academic vocabulary. Academic vocabulary instruction is most effective for ELs when instructors teach individual vocabulary words, word-learning strategies and word consciousness (August & Shanahan, 2007; Calderón, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Reynolds-Young & Hood, 2014). Another key strategy for building reading comprehension for ELs is teaching oral language skills, which consist of vocabulary, listening, syntactic and metalinguistic skills (August & Shanahan, 2007; Mancilla-Martinez, 2020). When ELs' aural understanding and oral production of academic language are robust, they apply this knowledge to reading and writing academic texts. To help ELs build their academic oral language skills, teachers must not only intensively teach academic vocabulary, but also support students in building background

knowledge about the topics they are studying (August & Shanahan, 2007; Staehr-Frenner & Snyder, 2017).

To support ELs in building vocabulary, background knowledge, and language skills around a single topic, many educators advocate for content-based instruction— an instructional approach in which content, language and literacy skills are all taught simultaneously. In effective content-based instruction the focus of lessons moves between content and the language used to convey it (Calderón, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Reynolds-Young & Hood, 2014; Staehr-Frenner & Snyder, 2017). Because content teachers have expertise in their content area, while EL teachers are language experts, content-based instruction lends itself to collaboration between mainstream and EL teachers.

### **Learning Theory**

This study is based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning, which is rooted in the belief that learning is social in nature and “children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1980, p. 88). In my teaching context this means that children learn content-area knowledge and English through listening to and interacting with their teacher and peers in the classroom. Vygotsky (1980) proposed that the tasks children perform with the assistance of others is the true measure of what they are mentally capable of. He famously named this idea the zone of proximal development (ZPD). When ELs are presented with grade-level content and language, their lack of English proficiency or background knowledge may prevent them from acquiring the new ideas or language. However, when information is presented to ELs in language they can understand, they can acquire the new ideas and also use language at or slightly above their proficiency level to interact in the classroom setting. Through this classroom interaction, ELs solidify and deepen their understanding of academic content and language. In other words, when ELs are taught within their ZPD, they can comprehend content and use language to express their understanding— initially with assistance and eventually independently. When mainstream and EL teachers co-plan the vocabulary and concepts they will teach in their classrooms, ELs can be taught within their ZPD by both their mainstream and EL teachers.

### **Methods**

#### **Inquiry Context**

Creekside Academy is located in a low-income neighborhood with many Arabic-speaking immigrant families who have recently arrived in the United States.

The school receives federal Title I funds, and all students are given free breakfast and lunch. Creekside Academy uses commercially published curriculum materials for daily math, Language Arts, social studies and science instruction. In addition, the school provides daily Arabic language instruction using materials created by the school district.

I chose to conduct this inquiry with the group of seven second-grade students who I pulled out of Ms. Scott’s class daily for a 40-minute EL intervention session. The students in my small group were all Arabic-speaking immigrants. Information about the students is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Student Information*

Student name	Country of origin & Grade during first year of attendance in U.S.	WIDA ACCESS score in 2020 <sup>2</sup>
Mohammad	Jordan Kindergarten	1.9
Aya	Yemen Kindergarten	2.6
Malak	Yemen Second	N/A
Omar	Iraq First	1.6
Ahmed	Iraq Kindergarten	2.6
Rimas	Syria Kindergarten	1.8
Manar	Yemen Second	1.8

<sup>2</sup>The WIDA ACCESS test is given each spring to measure students’ English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Scores range from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest).

## **Strategies Implemented**

My objective was to have my daily EL intervention sessions directly contribute to my students' success in their mainstream Language Arts class. Based on the findings of my literature review, I selected several strategies to implement with my second-grade students: (a) collaboration with the mainstream classroom teacher; (b) content-based instruction; (c) building vocabulary; (d) building background knowledge; (e) building oral language skills

To align my teaching with my students' mainstream Language Arts instruction and increase my collaboration with their classroom teacher, I implemented these strategies over the course of two Language Arts units. Unit 1 was non-fiction and focused on a text about animal habitats. In unit 2 students read the story *Stone Soup*.

### ***Collaboration***

My first strategy was to co-plan my lessons with my students' mainstream classroom teacher. Because I teach all grades (K-5) daily, I often have little time to meet with mainstream classroom teachers. However, to increase my understanding of what my second-grade students were studying in Language Arts with their classroom teacher, I met twice for one hour after school with their teacher, Ms. Scott. She showed me where to find the second-grade teachers' lesson plans in our school's Google drive folders and gave me access to the online version of the mainstream Language Arts curriculum. We discussed the language needs of the students in my intervention group and agreed upon a list of vocabulary we would both teach during the two units of my inquiry project.

### ***Content-Based Instruction***

My district requires that I devote some of my instructional time to using a commercially produced English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum called *Let's Go* (Nakata et al., 2011). The curriculum focuses on everyday vocabulary and basic grammar and has no content-based lessons. I am allowed to supplement *Let's Go* lessons with materials from my students' mainstream Language Arts curriculum, as well as books from the website *Learning A-Z* (Lazel, 2021). For the two intervention units I chose topics from the students' classroom Language Arts curriculum so during mainstream Language Arts class and EL intervention time students would be learning the same content. I used materials from *Let's Go* and *Learning A-Z* to present the two content-based lessons about animal habitats and the story *Stone Soup*.

### ***Vocabulary Building***

In tandem with content-based instruction I focused on building students' vocabulary with the words from their mainstream Language Arts lessons that I Ms. Scott and I had mutually agreed upon during our planning meeting. I devoted two days early in each unit exclusively to introducing and practicing these vocabulary words in context, and I made sure to incorporate the words throughout each unit's remaining lessons. This strategy ensured that students encountered and used words relevant to each lesson's content both during their classroom Language Arts instruction and my EL intervention sessions.

### ***Building Background Knowledge***

When teaching the units during my EL intervention block, I focused on building and activating students' background knowledge about each topic. For each unit I used the first day's lesson for students to discuss what they already knew about each topic before I introduced the new vocabulary and text. For the unit about animal habitats, the class discussed and drew a picture showing their favorite animal and where the animal lives. For the unit focusing on *Stone Soup*, the students talked about their personal experiences with sharing. ELs often lack background knowledge or experience with classroom topics, and activating and adding to their prior knowledge aided my students' comprehension of my instruction and our reading texts.

### ***Building Oral Language Skills***

A final strategy was to encourage oral language use during my intervention blocks. Oral language use contributes to EL students' reading comprehension, so I was certain to allow students time to orally discuss each lesson's content before and after reading each text. During the lessons aimed at building background, students discussed their prior knowledge of each lesson topic. After reading the texts, students responded to comprehension and higher-order thinking questions about the texts, first orally then in writing. When responding to the texts, I encouraged students to use their own words as well as the new vocabulary from the units.

## **Data Sources**

### ***Qualitative Data***

I collected several sources of word-based data. First, I kept a journal throughout the inquiry process recording every step and my reflections on these

steps (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Next, I collected my written correspondence with the students' classroom teacher and took notes during our two meetings. Additionally, after my inquiry I informally interviewed the students about what they had liked about the units and why. Then I transcribed their responses after the interview (Roulston, 2010).

### ***Quantitative Data***

To understand the success of my interventions numerically, I noted fall and winter scores on two different standardized measures of reading administered to all students at my school. I chose to focus on these scores because they are the means by which my school's administration measures the success of reading instruction and EL intervention. First, I collected students' reading level according to the Fountas and Pinnell text level gradient™, which ranks students' reading ability from aa to z (Heinemann, 2021). I also collected students' scores on a kindergarten-level word reading test created by easy CBM (BRT, 2021). These were valid measurements of my students' academic progress because they were performed at my students' level of reading and language proficiency. While classroom summative assessments for Language Arts units were given at grade-level, through Fountas and Pinnell and easy CBM my students were able to demonstrate progress in reading proficiency on tasks administered at their reading level.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Qualitative Data***

To identify themes in the qualitative data I looked for patterns and applied codes as I read my journals and the student interviews. These codes allowed me to group similar data together and draw larger conclusions (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Data from my journals fell into two broad categories: my instructional strategies and students' response to these strategies. Data from the student interviews fell into two broad categories: information the students retained and their reaction to the instructional strategies.

#### ***Quantitative Data***

To analyze the quantitative data I calculated whether students had gained, lost, or experienced no change in their reading level and word reading ability between fall and winter measures.

## Findings

### Qualitative

In the past, under the more traditional pull-out model of EL instruction, during my interventions I had taught content and vocabulary that was completely distinct from what my students were learning in their classroom Language Arts class. During this inquiry, I became aware of the content and vocabulary my students were learning in their mainstream Language Arts class. Based on my journal notes and student interviews, I discovered that initiating and establishing this collaborative relationship with my ELs' classroom teacher was the most beneficial strategy, serving as the foundation for all of the other strategies in this inquiry. Collaborating with Ms. Scott with an awareness of her curriculum, lesson plans and classroom texts allowed us to mutually agree upon lesson objectives and vocabulary so the learning during my ELs' intervention block mirrored their mainstream classroom learning. This allowed for my students to draw on and add to the knowledge they had gained as members of their mainstream classroom community during our intervention block (Vygotsky, 1980).

Using the collaborative relationship with Ms. Stewart as a foundation, I provided my ELs with content-based lessons focusing on the same concepts and vocabulary they were learning during their classroom Language Arts instruction. Content-based instruction and focused vocabulary instruction were two additional strategies that were highly effective according to the data in my journals of student behaviors during my lessons. To provide my ELs with the same content they were studying in their classroom, I used a version of *Stone Soup* that was written at their reading level. This allowed my students to study the same content they were learning with their classroom teacher while working within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1980). When reading the lower-level story during my intervention block, my ELs demonstrated their excitement about their familiarity with the story by volunteering eagerly to read a page aloud and enthusiastically whisper-reading the story independently. During the lesson on animal habitats, my ELs showed their knowledge of the new vocabulary used during both Language Arts class and intervention block by completing their own sentences using the words, first orally then in writing.

Qualitative data in my researcher journals also demonstrated that activating ELs background knowledge before both units and inviting them to use oral language over the course of the units were also effective strategies. At the beginning of the unit on animal habitats, I helped my students to relate the new information to their existing knowledge about pets and zoo animals. Before reading *Stone Soup*

I asked my students to reflect on their own experiences sharing. I noted that activating my students' background knowledge before these lessons helped them to contextualize the texts we read as a class, causing them to comprehend more than when we read texts without prior discussion of their background knowledge. Due to few opportunities and their limited English language proficiency, my ELs rarely spoke during their classroom Language Arts instruction, which limited the development of their oral academic language. During these two units I used oral discussion during background building activities and to review vocabulary. I noted that this strategy was successful while building background because it allowed students to orally practice any content-related vocabulary they were already familiar with. This strategy was helpful at the end of the unit when reviewing new vocabulary because it required students to both pronounce the new words and place them in full, grammatically-correct sentences. Moreover, practicing the new vocabulary orally in a group discussion allowed the ELs to benefit from the social nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

### **Quantitative**

The quantitative data summarized in Table 2 shows the change in my students' reading level between fall measures (taken in early November) and winter measures (taken in mid-February).

**Table 2***Summary of Quantitative Data*

	Country of origin & grade of first year attendance	Fall <sup>3</sup> F&P Reading Level	Winter <sup>4</sup> F&P Reading Level	Fall Kg-level words per minute	Winter Kg-level words per minute	Change in reading level
Mohammad	Jordan Kg	<a	<a	3	5	small increase
Aya	Yemen Kg	<a	a	8	14	increase
Malak	Yemen Second	<a	<a	0	5	small increase
Omar	Iraq First	<a	c	2	15	increase
Ahmed	Iraq Kg	c	d	2	6	increase
Rimas	Syria Kg	<a	a	3	3	small increase
Manar	Yemen Second	<a	b	0	5	increase

Three students had a small increase, and four students had a moderate increase in their academic reading level. The EL curriculum used by my district focused only on everyday vocabulary, not on academic vocabulary. An increase in my ELs reading level shows that the interventions were successful because my students demonstrated gains in their academic reading performance.

<sup>3</sup> Fall measures were taken before my inquiry

<sup>4</sup> Winter measures were taken after my inquiry

## Discussion

When I used a pull-out instructional model with a separate curriculum, my ELs were not showing improvement in their classroom Language Arts class, nor were they increasing their academic reading ability. For my students to make gains, I needed to establish a collaborative relationship with my ELs' classroom teacher. The main finding of my inquiry project is that establishing a collaborative relationship with a classroom teacher is a highly effective strategy for improving ELs' academic language performance. Collaborating with my ELs' classroom teacher allowed me to implement instruction that mirrored and built on the material they were learning in their Language Arts class. Once our collaborative relationship was established, I was able to implement four effective instructional strategies during my intervention block: content-based instruction; building vocabulary; building background knowledge; building oral language skills.

While I was designing this inquiry project, WIDA (2020) published a focus bulletin describing the essential elements for serving ELs through a collaborative relationship among stakeholders. According to the bulletin, the essential elements of a collaborative teaching relationship include co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing and co-reflecting. When I began to conceive of this inquiry project, I was working completely independently—teaching students using a pull-out model of instruction and a curriculum completely separate from my ELs' mainstream Language Arts curriculum. My school's schedule and culture did not allow me to move instantly to a collaborative relationship that included all four of these elements. If EL and mainstream teachers are interested in collaborating, but engaging in all four elements is not immediately possible, here are some recommendations for moving incrementally toward a collaborative model of instruction:

1. Begin with one or two steps in the cycle as a foundation on which to eventually build a full collaborative relationship. In my case, Ms. Scott and I began by co-planning lessons and co-assessing our students. Taking advantage of online tools such as shared google folders and online curriculum resources facilitated our co-planning and co-assessing processes.
2. Move toward an instructional model of co-teaching. This has become the preferred model of instruction because by keeping all ELs in the mainstream classroom, an equitable learning environment is available to all students. Co-teaching can be done using a variety of student configurations and teacher roles and responsibilities. In their book, Honigsfeld & Dove (2019) provide seven possible student configurations for co-teaching.

3. Co-assess and co-reflect with collaborative partners to measure a partnership's success, then adjust to continually improve student learning. I was able to share observational and standardized assessment data with Ms. Scott, and we each used the information as a basis from which to make decisions concerning our individual instructional paths forward. For teachers who co-teach, co-reflecting can provide an opportunity to discuss and continually improve teaching partnerships.

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