Maggie Wunderlich

Dr. Kevin Eyster

ENG 4950

6 July 2015

SIOP Model: Effective Instruction for English Learners

The number of English learner (EL) students in U.S. schools is rising. This group of students, who are learning English in addition to their native language, increased by over 63% between the years 1994 and 2010. Meanwhile, the total student population in Pre-K—12 schools grew by only 4.44% (“Growing Numbers”). In the majority of states, however, this EL group is “failing to achieve a score of ‘proficient’ in state language arts and math tests or to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals” (Menken 111). Furthermore, ELs enter schools with various linguistic and educational backgrounds that affect their academic success. Given these challenges, the mainstream pedagogy used for non-EL students may not be as effective for EL students. An acknowledged approach for effectively instructing English learners is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model.

Background

Most people agree that performing well on a standardized test, in a foreign language, would be difficult. However, that is exactly what is being asked of EL students. Regardless of their language proficiency, ELs take the same state tests on academic content that are administered to their non-EL peers. In other words, standardized testing for academic content areas is in English, before students are proficient in English. Some states offer accommodations, such as extended time, in order to separate language proficiency from content knowledge; however, most accommodations prove unhelpful (Menken 104). Consequently, results of state tests show an achievement gap since ELs are lagging behind academically.

Furthermore, EL students arrive in classrooms with various linguistic proficiencies (in English and in their native languages) and differing academic content knowledge (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 4). For example, some of these students are immigrants with comprehensive academic backgrounds from their native countries and may transfer these skills, abilities, and knowledge as they develop their English proficiency. Yet others come from war-affected or rural areas where they had an interrupted or limited education (5). Interestingly to most people, over 70% of EL students were born in the U.S., as second or third generation immigrants. Of these students, some struggle academically because they lack proficiency in both their first language and English while others are literate in their first language and will likely become proficient in English (3). Thus, EL students are diverse learners with varying linguistic and educational backgrounds.

Given this diversity and the above-referenced achievement gap, most EL students benefit from differentiated instruction. In the U.S., differentiated instruction is considered an “effective and powerful means” (Fairbairn and Jones-Vo 2) of meeting the needs of diverse learners and is recommended as a “high-quality instruction for all students” (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 18). It is defined as a teacher creating a “learning environment that addresses the diversity represented in a typical classroom… [by changing] “the pace, amount, level, or kind of instruction to meet the individual needs of each learner” (312).

Moreover, differentiated instruction “requires knowing and understanding key cultural and linguistic factors that profoundly and predictably impact each student’s learning and language acquisition” (Fairbairn and Jones-Vo 2). With respect to EL students, teachers need to become knowledgeable about the language acquisition process and cultural and linguistic factors that affect that acquisition. For example, it may be helpful to learn that conversational proficiency usually develops within two years, while academic language proficiency takes about five to seven years (Cummins 54). Knowing this, teachers can see that it may take years for a student to acquire academic proficiency, even though he/she appears to speak English well in casual conversations.

Eight Components of the SIOP Model

Other recommended features for the high-quality instruction of all students include cooperative learning, strategies for reading comprehension, and writer’s workshop. In addition to these high-quality features, the SIOP Model includes key features for the “academic success of [EL] learners, such as the inclusion of language objectives in every content lesson, the development of background knowledge, the acquisition of content-related vocabulary, and the emphasis on academic literacy practice” (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 18). Furthermore, it is a research-based model of sheltered instruction that “provides guidance for the best practices for English learners, grounded in more than two decades of classroom-based research, the experience of competent teachers, and findings from the professional literature” (13). Thus, the SIOP Model is a proven approach for effectively instructing English learners.

The framework for this model consists of eight components: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment (18). The purpose of incorporating these eight components into instruction is to make grade-level academic content comprehensible and accessible while supporting language development. A completely detailed description of these components would fill volumes and not be within the page requirements of this assignment. Therefore, the following is a general description of the components.

*Lesson Preparation*

Lesson preparation is an essential component of the SIOP model and encompasses the preparation of: content objectives, language objectives, appropriate content concepts, supplementary materials, adaptation of content, and meaningful activities (24). While most teachers already incorporate content objectives, SIOP teachers also incorporate the language objective, which addresses the language needed to perform a task and relates to the four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Generally, the content objective is the “what” or SWBAT (students will be able to) and the language objective is the “how” or SW (students will) (27).

Moreover, SIOP teachers make grade-level curriculum accessible to ELs and do not diminish the academic content. For example, they use supplementary materials, such as graphic organizers. They may also adapt the text to make it more comprehensible. Lastly, they create meaningful lessons whereby students make connections (39). Templates of lesson plans are provided as an appendix in *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, by Jana Echevarría, MaryEllen Vogt, and Deborah J. Short.

*Building Background*

As stated above, ELs’ linguistic proficiencies and academic content knowledge will vary. Therefore, SIOP teachers use strategies and activities to help build background knowledge and academic vocabulary. This encompasses linking concepts to students’ background experiences, linking between past and new learning, and developing key vocabulary. For example, some activities and strategies may be vocabulary games, using concept maps for definitions, and utilizing visuals to create concrete meaning. When teachers “explicitly [connect] past content and language learning to a new lesson’s content and language concepts [it] assists students in understanding that previous learning connects to today’s lesson” (93).

*Comprehensible Input*

According to Echevarría, Vogt, and Short, comprehensible input refers to making the content comprehensible through appropriate speech, clear explanation of academic tasks and using a variety of techniques. Teachers modulate, adjust the pace of their speech, and use several techniques, such as visuals, modeling, gestures, hands-on activities and demonstrations (114).

*Strategies*

While ELs are developing English proficiency and knowledge of academic content, learning is “more effective when teachers actively assist students in developing a variety of learning strategies, including those that are cognitive, metacognitive and language based” (140). Such learning strategies support the students’ self-monitoring, self-regulation, and problem solving. Moreover, SIOP teachers include strategies for learning higher-order thinking skills, such as questioning and tasks. Teachers provide “sufficient scaffolding, including verbal supports such as paraphrasing and frequent repetition; procedural supports, such as teacher modeling and think-alouds, one-on-one teaching” (141) and other strategies.

*Interaction*

Since ELs benefit greatly from interaction, teachers create ample opportunities for interaction. This may be individually with the teacher or with classmates. Consideration is made as to grouping configurations, sufficient wait time for student response and allowing clarification of directions or concepts in the native language. Generally, “SIOP teachers plan for and incorporate structured opportunities for students to use English in a variety of ways” (169).

*Practice and Application*

As per Echevarría, Vogt, and Short, all students need practice and application of newly acquired skills in order to master them. SIOP teachers use hands-on activities and materials, such as manipulatives. Moreover, they provide sufficient hands-on practice with new knowledge, different modalities for application of content and language knowledge, and integrate the four language domains. Consequently, ELs “forge connections between abstract and concrete concepts in a less language-dependent way” (189).

*Lesson Delivery*

This component deals with how well the content and language objectives are supported during the lesson, how well the students are engaged, and how appropriately the lesson is paced. Teachers keep in mind whether the objectives are observable, measurable and how they are assessed. SIOP teachers use several techniques to engage students and find the right pace, based on the students’ prior knowledge.

*Review and Assessment*

While review and assessment is important for all students, it is essential for the academic success of ELs because it guides teaching and re-teaching of new concepts. Teachers use informal assessments throughout lessons and determine understanding of key vocabulary and content concepts. Teachers get regular feedback on student output and assess student comprehension of objectives. Additionally, ELs are required to take standardized or other formal assessments. Consequently, Echevarría, Vogt, and Short assert that it is imperative for teachers “teach, review, and assess English learners’ understanding of the cross-curricular/process/ function words and terms that are often found in test questions” (236).

Conclusion

Even though English learner (EL) students bring diversity that enriches the classroom experience, this diversity may also cause instructional challenges because mainstream instruction might not be as effective. ELs typically do not score well on standardized testing, in large part since the assessments are given before they are proficient in English. Also challenging are their varied linguistic and academic content backgrounds. The SIOP Model is an effective instructional approach that meets the ELs’ unique needs.

While many of the features of the SIOP Model are the same as those in other high-quality instruction models, the SIOP Model also offers an instructional approach to meet the unique needs of ELs. According to Echevarría, Vogt, and Short, “What distinguishes [the SIOP Model] is the systematic, consistent, and simultaneous teaching of both content concepts and academic language thorough its thirty features” (282). Overall, this research-based model provides ways to effectively teach academic content and language to English learners.

School districts with teachers that implement the SIOP instructional approach would most likely see an improvement on student achievement scores and this would benefit everyone. Not only would the EL students’ needs be met, but the school district would benefit financially because more families would want to enroll their children in these schools. It would be worth discovering which school districts provide professional development for teachers to meet the EL students’ needs using the SIOP Model instructional approach. Likewise, it would be interesting to see which universities incorporate SIOP Model training in the pre-service teacher education. Given the increasing number of EL students in U.S. schools and the challenges that teachers face in educating them, it is imperative that educators take action in making academic content accessible and comprehensible to EL students while they are development English proficiency.

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