Position Paper: English Language Curriculum Guidelines for Elementary School English Language Learners

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Abstract

English Language Development (ELD) and Academic English Development (AED) curricula in most public schools lack a communicative method and consist mostly of dry, meaningless grammar lessons devoid of relevance and authentic context.

The purpose of this project is to develop guidelines to teach English language to elementary school children following the model for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). As the literature reveals, students acquire second languages more successfully in a risk free environment where the focus is on communication and not solely grammar drills of form and function. Language curriculum must allow a significant amount of time for target language practice in an authentic situational context. Grammar should be covered, but a balance must be struck between its explicit and implicit instruction. The instructor's objective is to create conditions where grammatical awareness becomes a product of language development and not solely the means.

The curriculum guidelines are based upon a communicative model where spoken language takes precedence over written language. While oral proficiency is the objective of most programs currently in use, it is the means towards such proficiency that is problematic. This project's guidelines direct instructors to create authentic situations relevant to students' experience where they are immersed in a spoken English environment, free of stress and arduous grammar drills, much like a child learns his or her first language. Language is learned through association to actual events and ample time is given to process input and to practice the language structures orally before any orthographic component is stressed.

Introduction

History of Grammar

The history of grammar can be traced to the ancient Greeks who placed importance on style rather than correctness. The Greek language, due in great part to Greece's prestige in the world, influenced many other languages and became the model for other grammars, including Latin. As grammar gained a foothold in ancient Rome, eloquence was the objective and grammar instruction was the means towards this goal (Patterson, 1998).

Centuries later in America, particularly after the Civil War, a push towards error free correctness made its way into schools. This movement, principally focused on writing, reflected an attitude to preserve linguistic purity. But to make grading simpler, writing assignments focused on mechanical correctness. This coincided with a post-war influx of non-elite students into colleges. The tendency towards correctness continued through the turn of the century (Patterson, 1998).

At last a commission [NCTE, 1956] concluded that grammar instruction had little effect on writing ability, but still believed grammar had a place in the assistance of language correctness. This focus on correctness continued into the 1970s. Grammar instruction continued during this period but the tradition leaned toward isolated instruction. Studies ensued claiming that formal grammar instruction had little or no effect on language development but if taught in conjunction with writing, positive influence could be noted. Non-the less, a de-emphasis in formal grammar instruction dominated the 1970s and 1980s and some critics argued that this de-emphasis manifested into an inadequately prepared student population entering college. Now educators find

themselves, with the prompting of many leading voices in the field, engaged in an effort to reexamine grammar instruction in the classroom and give teachers more voice in determining the most appropriate application of formal grammar instruction (Patterson, 1998).

Personal Journey into Language Acquisition

In the fall of 1998 I went back to school to get a teaching credential and by late summer 1999 was employed as a second grade teacher in the Oakland (California) Unified School District. Looking back the rewards have been innumerable. As a certified SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) teacher, all of my classes have been predominantly comprised of English language learners, representing a diverse racial makeup: Latino, Asian, Pacific Island, and African American. It has been wonderful teaching these children, as it provides a truly authentic multicultural experience.

But as a teacher I realize other rewards outside of the classroom – summer vacations. As a person with Italian ancestry I take advantage of summers off and spend several weeks each summer in Italy. This gives me the opportunity to more deeply connect with my Italian heritage and do something I have long wanted – become bilingual. As a teacher I have high expectations for my students to become proficient in a second language so naturally I figure, *Why not place those same expectations upon myself?* We live in an ever-shrinking multilingual world and I want to become an active participant.

Not being one to settle into a comfort zone I crave challenges and opportunities for professional growth, so after my sixth year of teaching in a public school I decided to

broaden my experience as an education professional and seek a position abroad. Wanting to immerse myself in Italian culture and language so that I could continue my journey into language acquisition I decided to seek a position as an English language instructor in Italy. But in order to do this competitively I needed an alternate English language teaching certification so I decided to contact the San Francisco affiliate of the University of Cambridge and gain the CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults).

I had always been a person intimidated by grammatical terms, rules, and their applications. So my experience teaching second grade English language learners for six years was valuable because it helped sharpen my knowledge of English grammar. But if six years of teaching in an elementary classroom was not enough to overcome my aversion to grammatical principles, the arduous CELTA training gave me confidence I previously lacked.

So at last I found myself undertaking a long held goal, teaching English in Italy, the country of my ancestry. I took my responsibility as an English teacher seriously and was therefore always prepared to deliver my lessons. This required a careful analysis of the language structures to be taught so that an effective lesson could be devised. And as a result an interesting thing seemed to happen. The more I studied English grammar the better my Italian became. Was it possible that there was some sort of latent linguistic transfer going on inside my head? And now, can I use my personal experience in acquiring a second language and use ESL methodology to devise effective language instruction for urban public elementary school students acquiring English? Discovering answers to these questions is the focus of this paper.

Statement of the Problem

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s the formal instruction of grammar, particularly in the primary grades, was significantly deemphasized in the United States and Great Britain (Mulroy, 2003). The anti-grammar crowd argued that formal grammar instruction was not necessary in the early years primarily because it displaced instruction and yielded little or no benefits in the development of primary grade students' language skills. What is now becoming evident, however, is that those students who went to school during the anti-grammar years entered college with a very weak knowledge of grammar. This resistance to grammar instruction has had implications in the learning of a second language as well. At last the tide seems to be turning as many educators are realizing that grammar instruction deserves a closer look and may be quite important after all.

The grammar debate has had broad implications in the creation of the curriculum guidelines. On the one hand my beliefs about effectively acquiring a second language are predicated upon having a strong grammatical foundation in a first language, however, the challenge of making a second language accessible to students who do not possess a strong foundation in a first language must be met. And in this context grammar's application must not impede language acquisition. As a remedy, but not as a sole means to an end, I believe in using a communicative model for language acquisition (Krashen, 1983). Such a model frames grammar holistically and mitigates impediments that can sometimes be associated with its overt teaching. Moreover, most ELD/AED programs in United States urban public schools do not use a communicative model and are insensitive to addressing the language needs of speakers of African American English (AAE).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to develop curriculum guidelines to teach academic English to elementary school English language learners following the model for teaching English in an ESL context. That is to say most ELD programs in public schools in the United States consist of dry, inauthentic content that is heavily weighted with grammar drills. In contrast, effective ELD programs should be based on a communicative model where students are actively engaged in authentic situational use of the target language thereby developing grammatical awareness as a consequence of spoken proficiency.

Research Question

What are the benefits of using ESL methodology, particularly the communicative approach, to teach English language to urban public school English language learners? What role does grammar play within this context?

Theoretical Rationale

I base my beliefs principally on the research of Chomsky (1964), most particularly his contributions to the understanding of *Universal Grammar* (UG), Krashen (1982), mainly his theories on second language acquisition, and Cummins (1981), his work on the interdependence of first and second languages. The methodology identified with the curriculum is substantially hinged on the theory of *Universal Grammar* (Chomsky, 1964), which posits that humans are wired with a set of rules for organizing language. This wiring underlies the development of first and subsequent languages. For students acquiring a second language the objective of the curriculum is for them to access the innate grammar [those underlying principles that are responsible for the development of their first language (Chomsky, 1964)] they already possess, and capitalize on it in developing the second language. Building the bridge to a second language is very much predicated on a solid foundation in one's first language. With proficiency in one language, the underlying grammars (rules) are in place so that the acquisition of a second language can occur most proficiently (Cummins, 1991).

These curriculum guidelines assist students in developing academic English for students that already speak a form of English, namely African American English (AAE). This aspect makes things very interesting and controversial. If I believe that the acquisition of a second language requires a solid foundation in the first language, and if I consider many English speaking urban students to be English language learners, then I would have to consider the brand of English that many African American students speak an actual language with a set of underlying principles in place. And I do.

This is a departure from what is taught in most urban schools today. Many African American students with limited academic English proficiency are spoon-fed academic English in what I believe are the wrong ways. This curriculum will assist them in exercising and analyzing the speech they have full command of and from this communicative position build the bridge to academic English.

The essence of this curriculum is based on communication. Humans use language to communicate and if curricula provide opportunities for students to use the target language in authentic ways within a risk free environment, acquisition will occur more readily (Krashen, 1982).

Background and Need

The case study by Farrell and Particia (2005) focused on the beliefs of two experienced English language primary school teachers, called Daphne and Velma for the sake of this review, in Singapore, and whether their actual classroom practices either converged with or diverged from their stated beliefs regarding the teaching of grammar. Data collection occurred over the span of two months in the form of interviews and classroom observations.

According to the interviews, both teachers felt the overt teaching of grammar yielded positive effects on students' speech and writing. Both teachers also believed in providing grammar drills for their students, as one reflected that as a student of English herself she benefited from the grammar drills provided by her teacher. In addition, actual classroom findings suggested that instructional practices were not always consistent with beliefs expressed in interviews.

While this case study focused primarily on teachers' beliefs regarding grammar instruction and whether or not their actual instructional practices converged with or diverged from those beliefs, and not on whether or not to teach grammar, it provides valuable insight into the complex beliefs that teachers hold regarding grammar instruction. At the very least, the results of this study compel the reflective teacher to more deeply examine his or her beliefs regarding grammar instruction in the classroom.

Review of the Literature

Second language success is very much contingent upon proficiency in one's first language but first language proficiency does not necessarily imply having grammatical savvy. The sources cited in the following review offer diverse philosophies regarding second language acquisition methodology. Some argue for the formal instruction of grammar and some for the informal. Some argue for explicit instruction while others implicit. A large part of this section includes a review of Mulroy (2003). While his piece does not solely speak to implications regarding second language acquisition, its inclusion in this paper is germane to my thesis because he argues in favor of the formal instruction of grammar as requisite for having a command of academic English, particularly in the area of writing. That the argument made by Mulroy, as well as other sources, at times is in contrast to my views regarding just how formal and explicit grammar instruction should be, this in no way dilutes my argument about grammar but adds another perspective to its necessary inclusion in the instruction of language.

Early History

According to Mulroy (2003), the problem started long ago when teachers decided not to teach grammar. And now, decades later, the implications of this de-emphasis in the formal instruction of grammar are evident, particularly at the college level. For example, in his work as a college professor, most of Mulroy's students can identify nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs ending in *ly*, but not much more. Moreover, Mulroy is struck by the fact that so many college students do not know what the *passive voice* is or that *am, is, are, was, were,* and *been* are all forms of the verb *be*. In his article he laments on the difficultly of providing language instruction to students lacking a basic understanding of

grammar. And as ongoing research presently supports the supposition that the ability to grasp grammar atrophies as people grow older, the difficulty Mulroy alludes to is made all the more worse.

Mulroy makes note of what he regards as the unfortunate truth that English teachers have been urged to pay less attention to formal grammar instruction. He cites Charles Fries, a linguist who first came to prominence in 1925 with the publication of his doctoral dissertation on the use of *shall* and *will*, and his influence playing a role in giving grammar a bad name. Fries' authority, as Mulroy states, lent weight to the false belief that modern linguists had discredited traditional grammar. Mulroy cites Fries as discouraging grammar, or wanting its instruction outlawed altogether. This in turn fueled support for the anti-grammar crowd, as they drew strength from the mistaken assertion that modern linguists were in their court, when in fact there was no necessary conflict between scientific linguists and traditional grammar.

Mulroy goes on to cite other reports on the subject such as, *Research in Written Composition*, by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, which promulgated the view that formal grammar instruction had negative effects on writing. He frequently mentions many reports conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) as well as many individuals supported by the NCTE, that follow the school of thought that formal instruction in grammar is destructive, particularly in the area of writing. Mulroy then makes note of opposition to the de-emphasis in grammar movement in mentioning Ed Vavra, a literature and language arts specialist, who published newsletters in support of formal grammar instruction and garnered the support needed to form the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG).

Perhaps Mulroy's personal feelings on the matter are best conveyed in his powerful conclusion to the first part of the article.

> That the prestige of teaching grammar has fallen so low lends credence to the impression that most contemporary college students do not understand it at all. Grammar is a demanding subject best learned at a young age when students are still forming their foundational linguistic habits. It must be taught slowly and systematically in a way that is suitable for the young. When grade school teachers understand basic concepts and teach them consistently, year after year, they endow their young students with a valuable foundation. In contrast, when many teachers have been convinced to ignore grammar and others do not understand it themselves, students will get sporadic instruction at best and some of it will be aimed only at "receptive competence." Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that most students arrive at college unable to define or recognize a clause. (p. 9)

The term *Receptive Competence*, that is, a student's understanding of what a teacher is referring to without a full command of its usage, was coined by Constance Weaver in her book, *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996).

Correlations to Second Language Acquisition

As stated in the introduction to this literature review implications regarding second language acquisition are not covered in-depth by Mulroy, however, his assertion that grammar is best learned at a young age when students are "still forming their foundational linguistic habits" (2003, p. 9) correlates strongly to research cited in this paper. Such research has found that having a strong foundation in one's first language

increases chances for success in the acquisition of a second language (Cummins, 1991). Therefore, sound grammatical awareness is interdependent with first language proficiency.

In the second part of his article, Mulroy references a recent study conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The study focused on adult literacy in the United States as compared to other high-income countries. The ETS described Americans' performance in language arts as "mediocre." More interestingly, the label applied to Americans who entered school starting in the 1960s. This period between the 1960s and 1970s was the same time that the anti-grammar doctrine gained a firm foothold in schools in the United States. In contrast, older Americans, those aged fifty-six years and above, were the second most literate in comprehending connected prose. The report concludes that our educational system is "clearly less productive [than those of other nations] in raising the literacy skills of students per dollar spent" (Mulroy, 2003, p. 10). Mulroy then goes on to cite more evidence in regards to a problem in language arts instruction by calling readers' attention to the decline in our nation's SAT scores. Notably, this decline began in the 1960s and 1970s and can be attributed to the fact that fewer students had outstanding verbal ability. The article then takes a compelling turn when Mulroy cites the experience of Omar Johnstone, a teacher of English grammar at a university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In the account noted, Johnstone speaks of his children, ages five and seven and Arabic/English bilinguals, receiving formal grammar instruction as well as eight hours per week of French language instruction. Furthermore, Johnstone notes that his job as a university instructor of English is made significantly easier in light of his students'

unfailing knowledge of the core concepts of formal grammar. Johnstone, as cited in Mulroy (2003), is quoted as saying,

> There are degrees of literacy. One of the cultural problems of the English-speaking world is that it is cut away from its sources, from the common experience of the English speaking peoples spanning some seven centuries. That experience is contained, for the most part, in books, and most of those books are inaccessible to all but a fortunate few. The reason for that is obvious, at least to me. (p. 11)

Further indication of the problem is highlighted by numbers, particularly in the area of foreign language enrollment in college. For example, in 1965, 16.5% of college credits were earned in foreign language. This percentage fell to 7.8% in 1977 and presently hovers somewhere between 7.3 and 8.2%. Today, any increase in percentages can be attributed to the great increase in the numbers of students going to college: 3,789,000 in 1960 and 14,590,000 in 1998. Despite this increase, enrollment in commonly taught languages other than Spanish has declined sharply between 1965 and 1980. Mulroy then cites Schulz and interprets Schulz by saying that emphasis on grammar has been replaced by various pedagogical innovations, especially the study of culture. The theory is that students will learn a language best by participation in cultural activities associated with it. In essence, foreign language teachers have generally responded to dwindling enrollments by emphasizing culture at the expense of grammar. But no dramatic improvements in enrollment have been realized. Mulroy hypothesizes that the problem lies not in the way languages were or are taught in college, but the fact that fewer students are given the

foundation in grammar in grade school that is necessary to succeed in the later study of a foreign language, however it is taught.

Mulroy's Reflections on Language Use

Mulroy diverts from outside research and continues with a powerful reflection on the different uses of language. In this he argues that statements are often made for reasons other than affirming the truth of their literal meaning. There is no set procedure for discovering motives behind a statement, but procedures do exist for ascertaining literal meaning. Mulroy references Immanuel Kant's terms determinate judgment and reflective judgment, and adds that "free associations" are the meanings that we attach to words by use of reflective judgment in contrast to the literal meanings that are discovered through determinate judgment by applying the rules of lexicography and grammar. This is an articulate argument in favor of the need for grammatical sensibility in enabling the grasping of literal meaning from text. The rules of grammar play an important role in establishing the literal meanings of statements. But the discrediting of literal meaning reinforces and is reinforced by the low status of grammar.

To show further support Mulroy presents several samples of his students' work. In the samples provided, students were instructed to derive the literal meaning of the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence. Mulroy was taken aback by the poor results, results that did not improve even after two chances. In reaction to his students' performances he writes,

> these responses seem to me to exemplify a kind of higher illiteracy. The students who suffer from this are proficient in spoken English and can express their own thoughts in writing adequately. They lack the tools, however, for the precise

> interpretation of the meaning of complex statements. This kind of illiteracy boils down to an ignorance of grammar. If a student interprets the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence as an exhortation to "preserve the earth," then how can you demonstrate the error? There is no way to do so that does not involve grammatical analysis: the subject of the main clause is **respect to the opinions of mankind**, the main verb is **requires**, and so forth. (p. 19)

He then launches into an interesting discourse on sensitive language and comments on America's obsession with finding euphemistic replacements to avoid offense and our fixation with the associations of our words rather than the literal meanings of our statements. This ties in perfectly with the trend away from the literal interpretation of language. Names attached to our opinions seem to matter more than their substance. He highlights this point by calling attention to the language arts standards of several schools and the tendency to exhort students to be sensitive and to psychoanalyze the speaker or writer behind the words. He argues that students should be exhorted to analyze the meaning of statements according to the rules of lexicography and grammar and then to test their truthfulness according to the rules of logic and evidence, while disregarding extraneous associations. We cannot have good conversations in our society unless we attend to the literal meanings of what we say to one another, and we cannot do that without greater emphasis on understanding grammar. To sum things up, Mulroy strongly believes that formal instruction in grammar needs to take place in schools.

Correlations to My Personal Journey into Language Acquisition

Many of Mulroy's findings correlate strongly to my personal experience acquiring a second language. As I began to acquire a firmer grasp of English grammar my Italian

improved. My experience as an English language teacher also correlates to Mulroy's assertions. For example, I am truly impressed with the linguistic sensibilities Italians have. From bus drivers to engineers, they have an ear for language and a grammatical understanding that exceeds that of most Americans. Their impressive compositions in English lend credence to the notion that a well-developed sense of grammar in a first language pays dividends in the learning of a second language. And their well-developed understanding of grammar began in their primary grade years. So, it comes as no surprise that their written work is strong and this seems a logical contrast to the lack of writing prowess illustrated by Americans who went to school during the anti-grammar years. It is also interesting to experience their classroom conduct. When presented with a new language structure my Italian students often asked, *What's the rule?* And when I explained it, if I could, they generally benefited from a preview of the operation. But in my experience teaching children I believe it is most beneficial to present the language structure first and dissect it later grammatically. A teacher runs the risk of confusing young students when presenting the grammatical rule for the structure first. While there are those exceptional children who are not drowned by formal grammar instruction and can apply rules metacognitively, in general I believe all children should practice the language holistically and in context. A latent understanding of grammar will, in most cases, follow and once revealed, the time is then ripe to emphasize the grammar. Children are predominantly feelers and are not in their heads so much. The skillful teacher must be ever cognizant of this and take advantage of children's innate ability to acquire language. There will be those that demonstrate an aptitude for grammar, yet for those whom grammar seems to impede, grammar should not be forsaken but highlighted as the

product of language awareness and not only the means. Applying this philosophy to adults, that is, addressing the grammar after the presentation and practice of the language [in cases other than the aforementioned – when they do not ask for the rules] seems to yield equally beneficial results.

A Second Language Learner's Perspective on Language Acquisition

In February 2007 I conducted an interview with Mr. Gustavo Aguilar, coordinator of the Bilingual Student Assessment Center for the Oakland Unified School District. Being that Mr. Aguilar is bilingual and works closely with issues regarding second language acquisition, I sought his insight. The information I found to be most striking from the interview were Mr. Aguilar's feelings in regards to the subject matter that ELD should be composed of. The following are his words (personal communication, February 2007).

> I believe in order to learn a new language you need to be engaged in activities that are relevant, interesting, and useful. I do not believe in language activities that are not meaningful to the lives of the students. I happen to teach Spanish to teachers and I do not use language that has no meaning. I teach it in a context that they can use, relate to, and enjoy. I call it language and culture immersion. They can experience the culture of the language and meaningful communication.

This view reflects my position stating most ELD programs in urban public schools consist of subject matter that is not relevant to students' lives and experiences. I believe tapping into such relevance is crucial to making language interesting and accessible.

Innatist Theories of Second Language Acquisition

I often refer to the innate ability humans rely upon in order to acquire language and in so doing I cite Chomsky and *Universal Grammar* (UG). While theorists of *innatism,* such as Chomsky, speak mainly to a child's first language, I believe this innate ability to acquire a first language is available and consequential when acquiring a second language. As Lightbown and Spada (1999) state, "learners eventually know more about the (second) language than they could reasonably have learned if they had to depend entirely on the input they are exposed to" (p. 37). It behooves the language instructor to trust this process and provide an environment consisting of meaningful input free of stress, much like an environment in which children acquire their first language.

The Communicative Approach to Second Language Learning

Implicit in the curriculum guidelines is language with an emphasis on communication and the negotiation of meaning and not merely a focus on grammatical forms. This communicative approach to language acquisition provides a far more conducive environment in which to acquire a second language and is virtually absent in urban public school ELD curricula, the very place it is needed. An overemphasis on grammar, which currently prevails in urban public schools, is not leading to the levels of language proficiency our English language learners need and deserve. As Lightbown and Spada (1999) assert, "the motivation of learners is often stifled by an insistence on correctness in the earliest stages of second language learning" (p. 119). In fact, Lightbown and colleagues (1983, 1987) found (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) that through aggressive focus on accuracy and repetitive grammatical form, certain language structures might be remembered by students but quickly forgotten as new

lessons are introduced. Furthermore, these in-class memorized forms are not necessarily used correctly in authentic settings outside of the classroom (p. 120). Moreover, Savignon (1972) argues (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) "that second language programs which focus *only* on accuracy and form do not give students sufficient opportunity to develop communication abilities in a second language" (p. 121). Lightbown and Spada (1999) interpret these findings stating "learners receiving grammar-based instruction are often unable to communicate their messages and intentions effectively in a second language" (p. 122). They go on to say that such a focus on accuracy results in an apprehension to take risks, which consequently adversely affects communication skill and linguistic knowledge in general (p. 122). In another study, which looked closely at grammar-based instruction in contrast to communicative practice, Montgomery and Eisenstein (1985) compared two ELL groups. Both groups received grammar instruction but one received an additional communicative practice component. Surprisingly, the researchers found (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) that the group that received 'real world' communicative practice made more gains in grammatical accuracy than the group that focused only on grammar (p. 121).

The Incidental Nature of Language Learning

Implicit within a communicative approach to second language learning are opportunities for student interaction where constructive negotiation for meaning can take place. This environment promotes a variety of language use that would otherwise be suppressed or absent in grammar-based language lessons and as the aforementioned research concludes, is crucial for language acquisition. And there are other benefits to this type of environment. A prominent characteristic embedded within my philosophy of

second language acquisition and inextricably linked to a communicative environment is the incidental nature in which many acquire language. That is to say, we pick up a lot of language without a conscious attention to its form. Lightbown and Spada (1999) assert:

> Fortunately, research has also shown that learners can learn a great deal that no-one ever teaches them. They are able to use their own internal learning mechanisms to discover many of the complex rules and relationships which underlie the language they wish to learn. Students, in this sense, may be said to learn much more than they are taught. (p. 169)

In support of this notion Krashen (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) argues that language instructors should focus on creating conditions in which ‘acquisition’ rather than ‘learning’ occurs (p. 38).

Development of Curriculum Guidelines

Analysis of Themes

One would reasonably conclude that an ELD curriculum for elementary age students would consist of a wide range of instructional strategies and activities aimed at developing English language skills. One might also conclude that any governing body in charge of developing and overseeing the implementation of such a curriculum would ensure as its first imperative that an ELD program be based on sound language acquisition research and implemented free of political biases. I argue that this ideal scenario is not the case in most of the public schools, particularly urban ones, in the United States.

Embedded within the curriculum guidelines are prominent themes based upon the following language acquisition research. Chomsky, through his analysis of *Universal Grammar* (1964), posits that humans are naturally predisposed to acquire language through reliance upon an underlying system of rules and an innate ability to organize language structures based upon these rules. Cummins (1981) proposes that higher degrees of literacy in one's first language correlate to higher degrees of literacy in a second language. Krashen (1982) postulates that language acquisition should focus on communication within a stress-free environment where situations are authentic and oral proficiency is fostered by ample opportunity for practice in the target language.

Based on my experience as an ELD teacher, the ELD programs that are mandated by the California Department of Education run contrary to the research findings I have cited. Not only am I a teacher of language with experience teaching primary grade students academic English and experience teaching adults English as a foreign language,

I am a second language learner as well. With this experience as base knowledge I ask why ELD programs within urban public schools fail to mirror those programs and language acquisition philosophies that have proven effective within the broader ESL world. In this world students of all ages learn English much the way humans learn their first language, through authentic exposure to spoken English with opportunities to process input and produce language free of stress and punitive measures.

Discussion

Summary

Comparison of Curriculum Guidelines with Existing Studies

A major feature of these curriculum guidelines is an emphasis on oral language. I believe success in language acquisition is very much contingent upon the amount of oral practice provided to the language learner. Since language is mainly used for communicative purposes the opportunity to practice meaningful language is crucial to developing confidence in the new language and in applying this confidence to other language skill areas. Genesee (2004) found (as cited by Saunders, Foorman, & Carlson, 2006) "there is increasing evidence that measures of oral proficiency that index academic language use correlate positively with other measures of academic achievement" (p. 182). Saunders, Foorman, and Carlson (2006) also found that the schools under their study that devoted time for a separate block of ELD in which more time was devoted to oral language practice demonstrated higher performance than the schools that did not use this separate block (p. 181).

I also argue that an effective ELD program must contain elements that reflect authentic experience in order to generate interest and motivation among students. "Students' vocabulary acquisition can be enhanced when it is embedded in real-world complex contexts that are familiar to them" (Genesee, 2000, p. 2).

Also implicit in my philosophy is the incidental nature of language learning in that acquisition often occurs as a byproduct of certain situations where the focus is not on language learning. Creating conditions of this nature for students can have positive effects on language acquisition. In a study conducted by Cohen (as cited by High, 1993)

bilingual students were encouraged to solve math problems cooperatively by negotiating meaning in either English or Spanish. These students later demonstrated greater gains in English language proficiency than they did in math (p. vi).

Limitations of the Curriculum Guidelines

Given the often rigid content standards put forth by federal and state mandates certain aspects of these curriculum guidelines may not be in alignment with content standards. Such standards vary from state to state. For example, in many public schools in California, ELD blocks for elementary English language learners must be fifty minutes in length. While these curriculum guidelines are prominently oral in nature there may exist conflict as to the optimal amount of time the lessons need to be taught each day and the different skills (reading, writing, speaking, & listening) that must be taught and assessed. Another limitation is that many teachers are not trained in the communicative model for language learning. These guidelines require teachers to be well versed in the communicative approach and currently most state certifications in the teaching of ELD do not recognize the various certifications that are regarded in the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) world. Also, this is a program that does not require the types of assessments currently in use in public schools in order to drive instruction. Oral proficiency in a language is difficult to assess and such proficiency does not readily translate to proficiency in other skill areas. Furthermore, due to classification disorders in some public schools students of varying degrees of language proficiency are often placed in the same class. While this does not present a daunting challenge to the skilled language teacher, there could be implications regarding the differentiation of curriculum. Also, these curriculum guidelines are largely comprised of directives where

teachers are guided to create a specific environment and rely upon improvisational skill to carry out the lesson. Some teachers may be inadequately prepared for this or may have their planning time compromised.

Implications for Future Research

Meeting the needs of English language learners in the public schools of the United States is a challenging task. The ever-growing percentage of limited proficient English speakers entering school adds urgency to this challenge. Research conducted on ELD practice must examine the most widely practiced methodologies currently in use in our nation's public schools. Given the political nature of this topic and the fact that schools in need of funds can easily manipulate data, future research must focus more carefully on findings made from observations and testimonials than on findings taken from student scores. Factors such as the various levels of proficiency among limited English speakers as well as the qualifications and experience of the teachers providing instruction must be carefully weighed. As Cazden (as cited in http://www.pbs.org) states:

> We need to know more about the ways in which teachers' behavior influences students' talk. We need research on how teachers gain expertise in language variation and language use, how their own language backgrounds and ethnicity affect that, and how expanded teacher expertise supports student achievement. (p. 3)

This argument brings to light the reality that issues of classroom discourse are often easily overlooked. A sound curriculum does not guard against the possibility that teachers may contaminate the language learning process by bringing their own preconceived notions and predisposed tendencies to the classroom.

Insofar that I favor a communicative approach akin to methodology practiced in the greater ESL world and believe in the incidental nature of language acquisition, research should also focus on non-native English speakers who have demonstrated an ability to speak English due mainly from exposure to English through the mass media. I believe this incidental acquisition is validated by the findings of theorists such as Krashen and Terrell, particularly their work on the *Natural Approach* (1983) to language learning and Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis* (1987) in that this type of language acquisition occurs without a conscious attempt to learn a language. In this way acquisition occurs free of stress since the emotional state of the learner is free of impediments that may filter out language input [low Affective Filter = stress free acquisition] (Krashen, 1987). The fact that so many non-native speakers are enamored with American pop culture makes their motivation to acquire English quite high.

Public schools, as influenced by federal and state policy, inadvertently administer ELD curricula more rigidly than is necessary. This translates to stress manifested as barriers to comprehensible input [affective filter is heightened] (Krashen, 1987). The tendency for public schools to implement ELD in such a way, steeped in research they claim to be reputable, would seem appropriate but ELD can be implemented effectively by taking a much simpler approach. I argue that an approach geared towards language for communicative purposes will provide for students a foundation from which to delve more thoroughly into language for academic purposes.

Overall Significance

The essence of these curriculum guidelines is an approach to ELD that focuses on language for communicative purposes and is heavily weighted towards oral proficiency.

This is significant because I believe the most important skills we can impart to our young language learners revolve around the ability to communicate. We hear more and more that public schools are not meeting the needs of English language learners despite sweeping legislation that pledges to make ELD a major priority. I have illustrated requisite skills that students must have to increase their success in acquiring English and I have argued for the need for highly skilled language teachers versed in methodology supported by current research. While these changes need time to occur the current reality must be addressed urgently. And there are things we can do now despite the deficits implicit in the administration of ELD curricula. We can shift our focus from curricula wrought with inauthentic, uninteresting drills of grammatical forms and functions to invigorating, innovative language experiences where grammar need not be forsaken but addressed as a logical component in the learning of English.

Academic English must be made available to students at school. It cannot be spoon-fed to them. Teachers must succeed in convincing students that certain knowledge would benefit them. When students instinctively feel that certain subjects would be worth their while they make a stronger effort to take academic matters more seriously. But content must be accessible. So many people worldwide have learned varying degrees of English in many cases because of its accessibility and much of it is learned incidentally through exposure to things such as pop culture. This type of acquisition occurs naturally through a stress-free inundation of language and culture. As a result many language learners are on board towards acquisition and so many of the barriers to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) are lessoned or removed altogether. The same phenomena can exist within the classroom if the pressures related to language learning are removed or

significantly reduced. Language instructors in urban schools today constantly deal with the effects of an ever-moving ideological pendulum that carries with it the friction of political meddling. Students ultimately bear this brunt. But if language instruction can take place skillfully and gracefully free of high stakes, hard-to-reach students will be much more open to its necessity. Many ELLs, particularly limited English proficient African Americans, have little motivation to become engaged in the language learning process. To many there is no value in learning academic English because it has not been sold to them in the right way. Young people know exactly what they want and what they like and they are listening more closely than we give them credit for. So often I find myself teaching a lesson where it seems many of my students are not engaged. I can tell by the expressions on their faces and by their body language. But as I speak, all the while sheltering my English, I slip in an obscure word where a simpler, more widely understood synonym could be used, and suddenly my students' expressions change to a look of puzzlement as they utter, *what did you say? What's that mean?* Amidst the chaos and boredom I am always amazed at their ability to sense something strange and foreign. It is at this point of curiosity teachers have a window of opportunity for language input. Of course educators must maintain high standards and expectations for language learners but we must also attempt to see things from their perspective and be sensitive to the unique demands of language acquisition in an urban setting.

Philosophical Implications for Teaching African American Students

In urban public schools many speakers of African American English (AAE) are considered limited English proficient (LEP) in that the speech they command is not classified as standard. As I devised these curriculum guidelines I found myself at times

immersed in the Black English, also referred to as Ebonics, debate. Much of my personal experience as a language teacher has involved teaching academic English to speakers of AAE and I admit to running into obstacles as I carefully considered the complexities of meeting the language needs of speakers of AAE, as well as students whose first language is not any form of English. But as I began to formulate the foundations of the curriculum guidelines and crystallize my arguments it became clear to me that the crux of my philosophy is that ELD curricula needs to be simplified and that regardless of the speakers involved, whether they be non-native English speakers or speakers of English not considered to be standard or academic, the emphasis should be on language for communicative purposes heavily weighted towards oral production. In this way a bridge towards standard and academic English will be just as well built. But in building this bridge teachers must embrace the oral speech of speakers of AAE. My philosophy regarding teaching speakers of AAE is akin to a contrastive analysis approach. In this approach students examine the features of both standard English and their home vernacular without being told one is better than the other. Consequently their home language is embraced and used as a springboard towards the development of academic English. Many who argue against such a philosophy fail to understand that it is necessary for students to see the differences between a dialectal language, such as AAE, and the standard. Without a reference the attainment of a standard dialect is difficult. Valdes (as cited in Yiakoumetti, 2007) points out that “one of the problems associated with learning a second dialect (the standard) is the fact that learners are not always aware of the exact differences between the first and second dialects” (p. 53). Furthermore, Yiakoumetti (2007) found in an exhaustive study of a contrastive analysis approach for bidialectal

students in Cypress, Greece, that “the choice to include the dialect in the classroom alongside the standard variety does not result in dialectal interference. One the contrary, dialectal interference is reduced and the two codes are better separated” (p. 62).

Students will have far more access to the development of academic English if their oral communication is embraced and used as a platform from which to lead into textbook-based academic language instruction instead of beginning lessons with meaningless textbook-based subject matter. Grammar should not be forsaken but highlighted as the product of language development and not only the means. Students’ confidence in speaking must be engendered first and this oral communication must be emphasized in a lasting way taking precedence over orthographic components. We are reminding them that they already command their own spoken language and know how to communicate and we are not intimidating them by presenting to them [as the principal component] a textbook with daunting academic English language. They can be led to academic proficiency through a vehicle they already command – oral communication. The fact that they speak AAE does not mean they are not communicating. Speakers of AAE convey meaning to one another very clearly. The skilled teacher must inspire these students to use their savvy in communicating through their street language and apply this skill in acquiring an academic language. In this way they become bilingual and their preferred way of communicating is not diminished or given substandard status. In my experience teaching language arts to African American students I have witnessed the use of academic language born of necessity. The conditions must be created, however, for the academic language to emerge. Academic English is not merely a list of words but a use of words, however common the lexicon, in constructing communication that demands a

departure from facile communication. I have seen African American students speak in academic fashion because a submission into the vernacular would have been insufficient in communicating the power and effect of their meaning. Again, language instructors must succeed in creating the conditions where the street language is simply insufficient and not an option. This academic language is within students, but as the contrastive model demonstrates, speakers of AAE must be free to speak naturally in their tongue of comfort since this is the language they command with flow. It would be folly to impede it. It is a valuable medium from which to transit into academic English. I quite find it ironic that African American elementary school students are under so much pressure to speak academic English. It is not as though their peers are speaking academic language any sooner. Speakers of AAE are very close to standard English and we do not see this level of communicative proficiency in LEP students of non-English origins. But the reality is such and educators should meet this challenge and empower African American students by showing them that their home language is not a substandard language. As Rickford (2000) adds,

> Students in turn are often relieved and delighted to learn that the vernacular they speak naturally is not the source of weakness that teachers often make it out to be, but a source of strength. Not only might their self-identity and motivation be enhanced by this, but the resistance to Standard English that is sometimes reported as an element in black students' limited success in school is likely to be reduced in the process. (p. 36)

Embracing African American students' language is synonymous with embracing their cultural backgrounds. Dismissing students' cultural backgrounds and language strengths

will likely leave students disengaged linguistically and cognitively (Meier, as cited in http://www.pbs.org). It should be noted that embracing African American students' home language does not equate to teaching them Ebonics. As the research concludes a bidialectal sensitivity with contrastive analysis features has proven beneficial in assisting speakers of AAE acquire the standard dialect. For more information on empirical evidence to this effect see the Aurora University study (Taylor, 1989), the Dekalb County, Georgia study (Harris-Wright, 1999), and the Academic English Mastery Program of the Los Angeles USD (1998).

Many African Americans feel that AAE is the only language they need and from the success many who speak it have realized in our society there is often little motivation to speak anything but it. So with this reality academic English needs to be presented as another tool that can enable students to acquire even more knowledge and power. And this tool cannot be spoon-fed. It must be made available and presented as something attractive that a student would want to learn. I assert that if instructors support speakers of AAE and provide enough stimuli to make them have to qualify certain events skillfully and appropriately the acquisition of academic English will occur naturally. These students need to be reminded that the academic language is within them and it is simply a matter of bringing it out.

Curriculum Guidelines

Effective lessons should be derived from and connected to real experiences such as home life, daily life, curiosities, and even conflict. The language instructor should make the lesson objectives very clear but must also be willing to occasionally not provide a road map. For urban schoolchildren a road map often complicates negotiation. The flexible instructor sets an ultimate objective and trusts students in getting there.

If lessons are not derived from or connected to real experiences they should at least be familiar to students. This assists in holding students' attention and minimizes distractions that may arise from details of new language patterns (Yiakoumetti, 2007).

Listening activities involving authentic speech are crucial, especially if the speakers in the recordings share dialects with students. This induces heightened student interest because language learners are more familiar with the language being spoken. Once students digest what was listened to a discussion and comprehension component can then be added where academic language is stressed.

Social interaction where negotiation of meaning can take place must be stressed. If we agree with Vygotsky (1978) and his conclusion that language comes as a result of social interaction, the language instructor must create an interactive environment. Task-based lessons where teacher talk is minimized is key.

As for interaction, advanced students can be placed with lower level students in paired or group activities. As Lantolf (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) claims, "second language learners advance to higher levels of linguistic knowledge when they collaborate and interact with speakers of the second language who are more

knowledgeable than they are" (p. 44). Advanced students can also be placed in less dominant roles to encourage output from lower level learners.

Many characteristics within the following guidelines might seem intended for speakers of AAE but it should be noted that these guidelines are well suited for all urban school children. Effective academic English lessons could start by reading literature that is very rhythmically based with alliterative features. The teacher reads it and the students repeat it. In this lesson vocal articulation is practiced until mastered. Once mastered the actual written piece is shown to them. Orthography, grammar, and especially vocabulary can be addressed at this stage with much efficacy because the students now feel as though they own it. As Collier notes, "reading is perhaps the most important element in vocabulary instruction" (2007, p. 16).

Having already mastered the piece in the oral modality, reading it and dissecting it grammatically is less daunting. The initial language construction, whether academic or of non-standard dialect, must be meaningful and preferably related to students' experience or at least not solely derived from textbook exercises. Teachers place an often-impenetrable barrier between students and language content by presenting something that resembles textbook lessons. Urban children live in a world where teachers have to compete with the other things that have the students' attention such as video games and other fast-paced non-literacy based communication that is part of their sound bite culture. Changing their school experience to something akin to their normal reality in order to reach them is the objective. Language instructors need to invite students to speak and learn and not spoon-feed them.

Reading books written in vernacular dialects can also serve as the basis for good academic English lessons. Students read passages from the book and produce academic English versions in both written and spoken form that are then checked for accuracy.

Lessons can also be derived from student-dictated pieces such as raps, chants, and poems. In addition to preserving original student-created pieces, academic English language alternative versions can be provided to students for grammar-based analysis of the language structures involved.

Art can serve as very valuable stimuli for language production. Students can create illustrations and describe the illustrations. Descriptions can be recorded both orally and in written form. Students can then listen and/or read each other's descriptions and produce reports of original descriptions. Using the rules for reported speech can provide an effective verb tense lesson.

ELD lessons can originate from the conflict students are experiencing. Ideally educators would like the school experience to be separate from the home experience but this is often difficult or impossible as many urban students bring their conflict to school and see no distinction between home and school. In this case educators need to take advantage of this and use conflict as a source for the creation of some lessons. This would also serve as character development as it is the unfortunate reality that conflict management in urban schools is not a high priority and receives a disproportionate amount of time and funding in relation to other components of curricula. Lessons can take place the day following the incident. For example, an instructor could begin by saying, *Yesterday there was a confrontation and this is what happened; here's the situation; these words were spoken. What form could the response to this conflict have*

taken in order for the conflict to be addressed appropriately? What words could have been spoken that could have better remedied the situation? Many effective lesson components within the framework of ELD/AED can be developed from such authentic subject matter all the while intersecting with a valuable character development/conflict management lesson as well.

Overview of a communicative approach

Teaching language for communicative purposes involves using a functional approach that emphasizes meaning and use in realistic contexts. The teacher is the facilitator and activities are student centered based on their specific needs. Listening and speaking is given greater initial priority than reading and writing. Below is an outline for PPP [Presentation, Practice, Production] (Mohamed, 1999), a widely used ESL methodology.

Presentation stage: The teacher illustrates the meaning of the language item [words, phrases, expressions, grammar structures] showcased in the lesson through a variety of techniques including stories, gestures, visuals, etc. The teacher also checks for understanding. For example if the language structure is *I have a cold*, the teacher must make it clear through gestures that the word *cold* in this case represents an affliction and not temperature. He/she could demonstrate this by perhaps sneezing, blowing nose, and holding forehead. A simple concept check question should follow involving the teacher making a shivering gesture while asking, *Do I mean this kind of cold?* This is known as a *negative check* because the correct student answer is *no*.

Practice stage: This stage grants sufficient opportunity for students to practice the new language item. Pronunciation practice comes first taking the form of the teacher saying

the item initially at normal speed, then broken down slowly, and once again at normal speed. Students repeat item at each speed. Once pronunciation is mastered the written component is shown and students copy it. Finally more practice is allowed through brief, concise teacher-inspired exercises that could involve dialogue, repetition drills, and games.

Production stage: This very important stage allows students to use the language item orally and in written form in a freer setting. As previously stated it is imperative that the teacher creates an appropriate context for student production and simply monitors language use all the while encouraging oral communication and interjecting corrections gently without impeding language flow.

Lesson ideas using functional language

At a ball game; At a concert; My favorite musical instrument; My favorite recording artist; On a field trip; Replying to a classified ad; At a restaurant; Menus; Recipes; Movies; Comics and comic strips. Use your imagination and try to relate lessons to student interest. The ideas are limitless.

Reflections

This paper in many ways is a record of my evolving position on second language acquisition. I began writing it in the fall of 2005 at a time when my objective was to only focus on the implications of grammar in the learning of a second language. A careful reading of the literature review section, particularly my report of Mulroy's piece, is evidence of this, as it does not refer to a communicative approach to second language acquisition. As my focus changed towards the creation of curriculum guidelines I thought it necessary to omit much of the content in the literature review that did not speak to second language acquisition. But my professor argued against doing this. As I moved towards completion of the paper I began to see the wisdom in such advice and do not regret keeping the literature review section in its comprehensive form. Among many things, it, as well as the whole paper, serves as a document that traces my information journey from an initial exploration of grammar to the creation of curriculum guidelines.

I began my exploration with a grounded theory and strong convictions regarding my personal philosophy of second language acquisition. Digging through the research was very rewarding as I found studies that substantiated my personal views and experience. Of course I could not have been the only person to have such revelations. Mindful teachers immersed within similar environments must have surely noticed what I had. But I cannot tell teachers exactly how to do what I argue for. I can only give guidelines and trust that in similar situations, the committed, passionate teacher will see what I have seen and will instinctively react to the diverse needs of students and above all trust in the miraculous. With patience, faith, and reasonable expectations students can succeed. I understand my revelations are nothing new and I take solace in this admission.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel but there is a need to recommit it where it is needed. These curriculum guidelines, grounded in the literature cited, are an attempt to do just that and pay tribute to and serve the unique character of our fledgling multilingual youth.

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