The effects of ESL-trained content-area teachers: Reducing middle-school students to incidental language learners

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I outline the program for language minority youth instituted by a middle-school principal, working in a school district in the United States with a large language minority population. In essence, the principal first required the entire teaching staff to secure ESL training in the form of in-services in content-based ESL, and subsequently mainstreamed all of her recent immigrant students, accounting for roughly one twelfth of the student body. The principal based her plan on the assumption, supported by a statewide policy requiring ESL training, that such training would result in teachers trained to address all the language learning needs of recent immigrants in the context of content-area classrooms. The result, however, demonstrated here through the case study of one recent immigrant, shows that students were reduced to incidental language learning opportunities and functionally achieved no gains in English language knowledge over the course of one school year. This paper highlights the central role that principals play in the school. It further addresses concerns about ‘mainstreaming’ and illustrates the importance of a language-focused curriculum taught by ESL specialists, as part of the overall curriculum, for ESL learners in schools.

Introduction

In the United States as well as other traditional immigrant countries, the last several years have seen an increase in numbers of language minority students in public school systems. This change is reflected both in the number of students who come to school speaking languages other than English, and in the number of schools formerly monolingual which now have a linguistically diverse population.¹

The debate on how best to educate language minority students from the perspective of the best educational practices and curriculums have been examined extensively by applied linguists (August and Hakuta 1997). This debate acknowledges the dual needs of school-aged immigrants to master a
new language as well as academic content in a relatively short period of time, given the pressures of a standards-based curriculum in most states. Since the advent of strong advocates for the communicative approach in the 1980s, a shift from ‘focus on form’ to ‘focus on function’ occurred in classroom ESL teaching. More recently, advances in the area of content-based instruction have generated a strong bias in favour of teaching language through age-appropriate content, rather than concentrating on language usage prior to introduction of content (Cantoni-Harvey 1987; Chamot and O’Malley 1994; Ramirez 1995; Echevarria, Vogt and Short 2000; Benesch 2001). At the same time, recent political changes in the United States have ensured that more language minority children spend the majority of their day in English-only classrooms, rather than ESL or bilingual classrooms. As such, applied linguists have recently focused attention on how best to prepare all teachers, not just ESL teachers, on the needs of language minority youth (Wong Fillmore and Snow 2000).²

However, as this debate largely takes place within the field of applied linguistics and ESL, it has little or no bearing on the nature of educational planning for many language minority youth. Such planning takes place primarily at the school district and/or individual school level by administrators, in particular principals, with little or no contact with ESL specialists or training in second language acquisition or applied linguistics. Yet, these same individuals are often the central players in how the school as a whole operates and the ways in which language minority youth are addressed. Merchant (1999) outlines a contradiction that exists for most principals as they fulfil their dual roles as instructional leaders on the one hand and effective managers on the other hand. The first role implies an up-to-date knowledge of curricular development and a role of change agent, guiding the teaching staff in new directions. The second role, in contrast, implies a need to focus on the status quo and the maintenance of smooth operations of the school as a whole, in spite of change. Hence principals find themselves engaged in a balancing act, as they guide an increasingly diverse student population to an educational goal that is increasingly defined in terms of the same results on standardised measures of assessment. In this setting, language minority students are in danger of becoming ‘ghosts’ in the classroom (Merchant 1999).

In this article, I outline one middle school principal’s process of planning and implementing a new program for recent immigrant children, namely the mainstreaming of all students following the implementation of ESL strategy training for all teachers on the campus. I will argue that this bilingual principal’s plan fails to have the desired effect with respect to gains in English language development. I will outline how her personal assumptions
about the nature of second language learning, together with unclear statewide mandates with respect to language minority education, lead her to choose a curriculum that does not provide language minority youth access to any focused language instruction. The principal’s primary goal for the campus as a whole leads her not to focus on language development per se as a goal, and therefore not to monitor development in this area among her recent immigrant students. Rather, the principal focuses her planning and monitoring around the creation of an environment which challenges students to succeed academically as measured through achievement on statewide standardised achievement tests. This focus produces some surprising results. Some of the recent immigrant youth achieve a measure of success on the standardised assessments of essential knowledge and skills (TAKS), while demonstrating no advances in the development of their use of spoken English. Therefore, this case study introduces an interesting question about the relationship between language learning and academic content learning.

The context and the people involved

Garner Independent School District\(^3\) is one of several school districts in the greater San Ramón metropolitan area. The district, one of the poorest and smallest urban districts in Texas, is located in the city’s oldest barrio. The student enrolment is overwhelmingly Latino and includes many students from long-established Texas families as well as a smaller number of recent immigrants. Approximately 20 per cent of students in the district are designated as limited English proficient (LEP) and therefore, through additional state and federal funding, receive some type of language instructional support. In the elementary schools, this support is generally in the form of bilingual instruction. By middle school, all students, including new immigrants, are enrolled in all-English classrooms for all or part of their school day; additional support may come in the form of ESL-trained content-area teachers or one or more classes per day in an ESL pull-out or sheltered class.

Madera Middle School is one of four middle schools in Garner Independent School District. In 2001–2002, Madera’s total student body comprises 628 students enrolled in grades six through eight, of whom 191 are designated as limited English proficient (LEP). One quarter of these, 52, are recent immigrants, students who have been in the United States for less than one full academic year, essentially all from Mexico. These numbers are somewhat deceptive, however, as fully 75 per cent of the students, but only about 15 per cent of the teaching staff, are bilingual in Spanish and English to varying degrees.\(^4\) Madera Middle School has a long-standing reputation in the district as ‘the immigrant school’ as well as the school with the largest
low-income population, owing to the public housing available in the area. Madera, also, however, now holds the distinction as the school with the greatest increase in achievement in terms of standardised test scores from 2000 to 2002. This time period corresponds with the tenure of the current principal, Ms Maria Azuela.

While new in her role as principal, Ms Azuela’s experience with the district extends over 19 years, when she began teaching science at Madera and later became the instructional specialist on the campus as well. Before returning to Madera as principal in 2000, Ms Azuela served as academic dean at a high school for a number of years. Within the context of a school and a district with a high dropout rate, Ms Azuela’s primary goal is to create an environment that challenges students to succeed academically. She has instituted three primary policies that relate to this goal: the ‘no failure’, the ‘dress for success’, and the ‘I am the best’ policies. The ‘no failure’ policy means that all students with grades below 70 (out of 100) receive an ‘incomplete’ and must attend TAP (tutoring assistance program) before and after school and on Saturdays, until they have removed the ‘incomplete’. The ‘dress for success’ policy, which entails wearing clothes of particular colours, but not a uniform, is designed to reduce differences in outward appearance between students and to focus on positive identity development. Unlike a uniform policy, Ms Azuela believes that the dress for success policy imbues students with a sense of personal responsibility. The ‘I am the best’ policy centres on developing respect for self and others, and works to combat racism and an anti-immigrant orientation in the school. In a school that is 98 per cent Hispanic, learning to respect one’s own race is part of the campus improvement plan and therefore the focus of a range of teacher-organised activities. Racism is particularly a problem for the recent immigrants as Ms Azuela explains, ‘They’re kinda like rejected, labelled … they call ‘em mojados’ [wetbacks]. To address this issue she talks to the kids:

Why are you doing [this]? You’re putting down your own race, even though you were born here, still your roots are just like my roots, I have Indian, African and Spanish within me, … and you know anyway it’s the same thing here, you’re putting your own people down, you should be able to help ’em, it’s your own people. We’re all Hispanics, we all should be united.

Ms Azuela has a set of personal experiences that allow her to understand how recent immigrants feel in a new school. Herself of Hispanic origin and raised attending all-Spanish schools, she came face to face with issues of cultural and linguistic difference upon her arrival in Texas as a young teacher as well as a student working on a master’s degree in educational leadership. Through that experience she has developed empathy for other
immigrants, who are still either monolingual Spanish speakers or only in the early stages of acquiring English.

**The new plan for recent immigrants**

In 2001–2002, a major change affected the middle-school-age recent immigrants in Garner Independent School District. For the previous five years, a federally funded grant had supported a language school at Madera that served all recent immigrants from the four middle schools in the district. The language school provided beginning ESL instruction as well as some sheltered content instruction. Students remained in the language school for three months to a full school year, prior to being placed for part of the day in grade-level content-area classrooms. The end of supplementary funding, as well as a change in state policy with respect to exemptions from standardised testing for language minority students, led the four middle-school principals in Garner to distribute ‘the language school kids’ among the four schools according to their address. As a result, Madera’s recent immigrant population dropped by about 50 per cent to 52 students.

In fall 2001, Ms Azuela put in place a program to mainstream the recent immigrants for their entire school day. Ms Azuela designed her plan with three goals in mind: (1) not isolating recent immigrants from others in the school, (2) ensuring exposure to content appropriate to their grade level, and (3) ensuring the success of standardised measures of assessment at the end of their second year. This plan thus operationalised the overall school goals with respect to recent immigrants; through mainstreaming recent immigrants would integrate socially and academically and help move the school to exemplary status. This academic goal of achieving exemplary status was perhaps the most important to Ms Azuela, as it was in accordance with her own ‘no failure policy’ as well as the state’s accountability system, which rewards schools and their administrators on the basis of standardised test scores.

The pressure principals feel from the accountability system, in fact, is the primary reason Ms Azuela has not tried to keep the language school on her campus. Because language minority students are known to earn lower test scores, their placement ‘was an issue among the principals’. Her personal view is, ‘We don’t mind teaching the [recent immigrant] kids, we don’t mind exposing them, but then the scores should count for the individual school and not for the school where they’re at’. Hence the language minority students are seen district-wide as a liability in the competition for high test scores.

Ms Azuela’s mainstreaming plan rests on a teacher development initiative she set in motion the previous year when the language school was still operating at Madera. Ms Azuela has aggressively pursued a plan to ensure that all
teachers on her campus have ESL training so students exiting the language school can work with ESL-trained teachers. While state regulations require that only those content-area teachers with LEP students in their classrooms receive ESL strategies and methods training, Ms Azuela has extended this requirement to the entire campus including all teachers, aides and administrative staff. Language arts and reading teachers thus have attended 15 contact hours of ESL strategy training, while all others have attended 12 contact hours, a training program they must repeat every two years. This training corresponds with state minimum requirements. Ms Azuela proudly describes the expertise of her teaching staff, and maintains that her teachers not only know, but also use, the ESL strategies they have learned in their classrooms. These strategies include writing objectives on the board, providing bilingual vocabulary lists of key content vocabulary, use of visuals and demonstrations, as well as cooperative grouping of students in mixed language constellations.

In 2001–2002, with this goal largely accomplished, Ms Azuela reorganises her teachers into teams, and clusters three to five recent immigrants together. As students travel in their groups throughout the day, the teaching team, Ms Azuela believes, will be able to monitor student needs and student progress more effectively, and ensure that needed interventions occur more rapidly.

**Assumptions of second language learning and teaching**

Ms Azuela’s organisational and curricular changes rest on her personal experience as a second language learner and the theory of second language acquisition she has developed from that experience. For Ms Azuela, second language acquisition occurs with little or no effort provided the individual is highly motivated and has a strong background in their first language.

Ms Azuela distinguishes between two types of recent immigrants, those with and those without a solid grounding in their native language. ‘What I’ve noticed is that some of the students, if they have a good solid background in Spanish, in the first language, it is much easier for them to learn the second language and I’m a primary example.’ Later she reiterates:

The better knowledge you have of your first language, the better transition you can do to the English language. And sometimes, and what I’ve seen here is that a lot of the students because I’ve seen them write in Spanish, and it’s … you know the Spanish is not good Spanish, they have difficulty with their first language so consequently they’re gonna have more trouble with English.

Ironically, when Ms Azuela talks about the specific students on her campus, she acknowledges that the majority fit in the second category, those
without a good background in their first language, students whom she views as ‘low achievers’.

The low achievers are the ones that don’t have a big knowledge or background in their language, … they do lack that because, whatever reasons, they didn’t want to go to school or they missed a lot of school, they were not highly motivated, so those are the ones that I have seen the most here.

Ms Azuela links a strong literacy background in the first language with a high motivation and by implication, lack of personal motivation in part explains lack of achievement in the first language, which extends to difficulties in developing the second language. This then is the student body for whom Ms Azuela has developed her mainstreaming plan.

The results: Academic achievement and English development

Ms Azuela’s plan falls in line with expectations of the state with respect to language support for language minority students. However, while some students did show some success with respect to standardised tests, the majority of the recent immigrants showed little or no gains in their English language development over the course of the school year. The mainstreaming program has in effect turned these students into incidental language learners with no focused instruction on the language.

In a year-long examination of one seventh grade science classroom with an ESL-trained teacher, we found that the ESL strategies used, while somewhat effective in conveying content, were less than effective in developing academic, or even social English language. This was the outcome, in spite of the fact that this teacher is widely acknowledged as one of the best in the school, and uses an inquiry-based approach to teaching science. As specific ESL strategies, this monolingual teacher pairs bilingual students with monolingual Spanish speakers, provides bilingual texts, and allows recent immigrants to write all essays and homework assignments in Spanish. Given the context of the school, in which the majority of children are bilingual, together with these most frequently used strategies that involve a high use of Spanish, on many days recent immigrants have no need for English in order to accomplish academic and social goals.

The case of Manuel: Motivated English language learner

As an example of the type of advances, or rather lack thereof, made by students during this first year of the mainstreaming program, I will present a brief vignette of Manuel, a twelve-year-old seventh grader who has been a student at Madera since March 2000.7 Manuel falls into Ms Azuela’s category of
highly motivated students with a good background in Spanish. In fact, Manuel is in many ways the ‘poster’ child of the recent immigrants from the school’s perspective, as evidenced by his earning the award for the most improved seventh grader at the end of year ceremonies.

Manuel expresses a great desire to acquire English and talks about practising with his father when he sees him, in the grocery store, and with his one monolingual English friend. Notably, he does not talk about using or learning English in school. When pressed he explains, in Spanish, that his language arts teacher is his English teacher, and there he reads translations of English narratives and writes summaries in Spanish. In spite of being highly motivated and placed with the best team, Manuel exhibits next to no advances in his ability to use oral or written English over the course of the year, and experiences few if any opportunities to use English in a supportive environment. On a standardised measure, the LAS II (Language Assessment Scale) administered at the beginning and end of the year, Manuel remains a beginner with a score of Level 1 (out of 5 levels); his raw score is actually lower at the end of the school year than at the beginning.

In an informal interview with the author, a monolingual English speaker he knows well in the context of school, Manuel does produce more advanced English than on the LAS II, as shown in Example 1. Still, by the end of May 2002, he is unfamiliar with many vocabulary items he has been exposed to, but not taught, as part of the curriculum during the school year.

Example 1.\textsuperscript{8} After several minutes of more general interview, Manuel (M) has finished looking through *Frog, where are you?*, a wordless storybook by Mercer Mayer, and is trying to begin telling the story to the interviewer, Juliet (J). The interviewer has just asked him how one traditionally starts a story in English, and then offers the following help:

1 \begin{verbatim} J: When you start a story in in Spanish, a lot of times you say *habia una vez*. \end{verbatim}

2 \begin{verbatim} M: *<habia>* [<] una vez. \end{verbatim}

3 \begin{verbatim} J: Uhhuh, and what do you say in English ##? \end{verbatim}

4 \begin{verbatim} M: One time. \end{verbatim}

5 \begin{verbatim} J: Once upon a time, okay so if you start with once upon a time and I will help you if you need help. \end{verbatim}

6 \begin{verbatim} M: One, what miss? \end{verbatim}

7 \begin{verbatim} J: Once upon a time. \end{verbatim}

8 \begin{verbatim} M: Once upon a time? \end{verbatim}

9 \begin{verbatim} J: Mhm, see here this is how you write it. (shows spelling) \end{verbatim}
Once upon a [l] a time. (corrects pronunciation of ‘a’ from /uh/ to /e/)

Mhm.

Uhh um one frog is in the cup.

Mhm.

And then the little boy and the the go& [l] the dog, is asleep, <xxx> [>] is sleeping, I don’t know.

<Mhm.> [<]

And the frog is out of the cup.

Okay the frog is out in the cup, <uhhuh.> [>]

<Yeah.> [<]

And then he goes, despertar, como se dice?

He wakes up?

Uhhuh wakes up and then the frog is not there.

Hh!

And then he # la buscando como.

He’s looking for, he’s <searching> [>].

<Yeah> [<] he’s looking for the where the dog and the frog #, in the in the window, outside of you house.

What is evident from this small section is that Manuel is interested in acquiring English, he makes bids for vocabulary and then repeats it before moving on (lines 5–10, lines 19–21, lines 23–25). He also self-corrects on word choice (line 14) and on pronunciation (line 10). Yet, while he is able to give a skeleton of a story, he is not able to be creative or precise in his telling without support from the interviewer, a task he accomplishes well in Spanish, as well as one required on the standard writing assessment.

**SUCCESSES: SCHOOL-WIDE TEST SCORES**

In spite of the poor language development of the recent immigrants in the school, in 2001–2002, Madera gained the highest scores on the standardised tests in the district (among the four middle schools). In addition, the English language learners at Madera also outperformed those at the other three schools, although their overall failure rate remains high. Hence my analysis of failure is not perceived as such within the context of this district, in which the dropout rate is extremely high and many students including monolingual English speakers read at the second grade level in seventh grade.
Ms Azuela is unable to explain the success of her students, and if anything, she attributes it not to her mainstreaming of language minority students, but rather to the extensive after-school tutoring in the month prior to the tests. As she explains with respect to the language minority students:

We were worried that they wouldn't do it [pass the tests], but they did. There was one kid, that didn't pass anything but passed the social studies, monolingual [Spanish], and everybody was like in shock. I don't know whether he knew it or he guessed, it was a matter of chance, he didn't pass anything else, but he passed the social studies, which is what our regular kids, when I say regular, our native from here didn't pass and he did.

With respect to the standardised writing test, she expresses surprise and delight that ‘A lot of the kids that were in that group did pass the writing, they wrote compositions as two.’ Ms Azuela believes students who:

… write a 2 that’s been here only two years then it was good. And I personally had a problem with that, because it's like ‘man how could they expect,’ you know that is not fair to the kids how could they expect the child to, you know, write an essay in English?

At one and the same time, Ms Azuela disparages the state’s definition of success in terms of achievement on standardised tests, but works to ensure that success on standardised tests for her students and her school through her after-school tutoring program. Yet these very same students are often unable to carry on simple conversations in English or read textbooks or write on topics other than those outlined in the samples for standardised tests. How then does one spell success for language minority youth?

FOLLOW-UPS: ESL SUMMER SCHOOL

By the end of the 2001–2002 academic year, Ms Azuela, particularly at the urging of the district ESL specialist and as a result of some of the findings presented here, has begun to explore additional ways in which to support the recent immigrants. She has supported a month-long sheltered English institute for recent immigrants team-taught by the district ESL specialist and two content-area teachers. The focus was on explicit content-rich language acquisition in preparation for the new school year. Manuel, who has attended this course, has improved dramatically in both his verbal and writing ability, moving from a Level 1 to a Level 3 on the LAS II and increasing his reading level from second grade to fourth grade.

During the current school year (2002–2003), many teachers have remarked on the increased confidence and language knowledge of the immigrant students who attended the summer institute. These same teachers express
frustrations about the need to work with ‘the language school kids’ when they are struggling to meet the needs of the remainder of the students in class. In particular, the language arts and reading teachers, who have become *de facto* but not trained ESL teachers, voice frustrations with respect to the progress of their recent immigrant students, and suggest that the language school, like the summer institute, is essential.

Nonetheless, while Ms Azuela remains open to the idea of a second summer institute, she does not see the need to re-institute an ESL class as a regular part of the students’ curriculum, given that they have shown some advances in standardised achievement tests. The rest, that is, the development of English language knowledge, will happen ‘naturally’. Ms Azuela is, however, now aware of the fact that language development and academic development do not necessarily occur hand-in-hand, and plans to monitor this year’s scores more closely, as the students reported on here will only now be required to take standardised tests. This year’s standardised test scores will more clearly show the success or failure of the mainstreaming program.

**Implications**

This case study of a dedicated middle-school principal in an urban setting in the United States illustrates the challenges school leaders face in their dual roles as change agents and managers. Using a strong leadership style to create a school with a no-failure policy, a personal commitment to supporting language minority students, and a self-constructed theory of second language acquisition, this principal nonetheless fell short in ensuring the best language and academic development for recent immigrant students.

In stressing the need for ESL-trained teachers throughout the school, Ms Azuela is effective in building a climate of acceptance and success for the school as a whole. Ultimately, however, her plan does not support the language development of even motivated second language learners. This failure provides one piece of evidence in support of focused language instruction as a necessary part of the curriculum for middle-school second language learners, together with content-based instruction. Without a focus on form, this case study suggests, beginning second language learners do not develop language efficiently, at least at the middle-school level.

What is most striking about this case study is that the additional programs in the form of after-school tutoring have proven more effective in achieving academic, although not language development, than the activities for which content-area teachers have purportedly been trained. It suggests that Ms Azuela is unable to tie specific curricular designs to specific outcomes in the case of the language minority students because she lacks a clear understanding
of the processes of second language acquisition and the connections between language and content learning. This is evident in the plan to mainstream even the most recent arrivals for their entire school day, in a context in which the only exposure to English that students are likely to have all day occurs in school. It is also evident in her belief that a short exposure to ESL strategies training (12–15 hours over two years) is sufficient to ensure qualified teaching on the part of content-area teachers, whose primary concern is the development of content-area knowledge.

On a broader scale, this case study illustrates the importance of considering the entire context in which principals operate. In the United States today the climate is one that challenges schools to address the needs of language minority youth in the face of concerns about testing and accountability as well as limited resources. Specifically here, concerns for accountability led to the dissolution of a good program, the language school.

This case study finally may serve as a reminder to applied linguists and specialists in the area of ESL on the need to inform educational leaders on the principles of language acquisition processes and ESL teaching methods. Indeed, the need for applied linguists to enter public debates on education has been well illustrated in the debates around Ebonics in the United States. Without a clearer articulation of the importance of knowledge that linguists can bear, educational leaders and policy makers will continue to construct well-organised but uninformed plans that may limit educational success.

NOTES
1 In 2000–2001 an estimated 4.5 million English language learners (ELLs) attended public schools in the US, accounting for 9.6% of the school age population. States like Texas, with a traditional Hispanic population as well as a long border with Mexico, have higher than average percentages of ELLs in school. In 2000–2001, 570 000 ELLs accounted for 14% of the total school age population in Texas, an increase of 12.4% over the 1997–1998 figures (Kindler 2002).

2 Beginning in 2002, the University of Texas at San Antonio, one of the largest providers of teachers for the state, implemented a requirement that all pre-service teachers take one course in ESL teaching strategies. Moreover, the state of Texas following federal mandates also requires that all teachers who have students labelled as limited English proficient (LEP) in their classrooms have some in-service training on teaching modifications that support language learners.

3 This and all other names of people and places are pseudonyms.

4 For a variety of social and political reasons tied to the development of bilingual education in Texas, many parents opt to designate their children as monolingual English speakers. Once so designated, these students are not tested for English language knowledge and are not eligible for language support.
Beginning in 2001, the period of the exemption from standardised testing for students designated as LEP was changed from three years to one year.

A school achieves exemplary status and through that additional funding on the basis of the standardised test scores of the student body as a whole.

Manuel serves as a focal child in a larger study conducted at the same school during this time period. This larger study is based on observations and interviews of all of the students in one seventh grade science classroom and examines the language and science content development of these students. This larger study, entitled ‘Acquiring Academic Content and English Language Knowledge’, was funded through a grant by the Spencer Foundation awarded to Juliet Langman and Robert Bayley.

All oral language was transcribed using the CHILDES system (MacWhinney 1991). Here a modified transcript is provided using the following symbols:

<xxx> [>] overlapping speech follows
<xxx> [<] overlapping speech precedes
# pause of about one second
[/] retracing for purpose of self-correction

A composition receiving two points out of five can be a passing score, if in addition students answer 28 out of 40 grammar and punctuation multiple choice questions correctly.

REFERENCES


