The Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL); A Tool for Supporting Teachers of English Language Learners

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By Elvira G. Armas, Ed.D. and Magaly Lavadenz, Ph.D., Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University

Schools and school systems are experiencing an instructional support gap that results in limited opportunities for educators to analyze, reflect on, and improve research-based practices for ELLs so that outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students can change. To address this need, an inter-disciplinary research team from the Center for Equity for English Learners’, comprised of educational leaders, teachers, researchers, and content experts developed a classroom observational instrument - the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL). The OPAL is intended for teachers, educational leaders, coaches, and others to conduct focused classroom observations for three potential purposes: research/evaluation, professional development, and coaching.

Cultural and linguistic diversity has increased in California and throughout the United States. There are over five million students in the United States whose first language is not English, representing a 57% increase over the past ten years (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). Increased diversity in the United States points to the need for an increased multicultural orientation in education, as well as enriched opportunities for students to establish a strong foundation as a requisite for acquiring academic literacy. National and state student achievement standardized test data indicate increasingly widening gaps in reading and math achievement between English-proficient students and English Language Learners (Center on Education Policy, 2005, NAEP, Baralova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). This evidence points to the need for more teachers to receive comprehensive and sustained professional development required to refine classroom practice so that all students, including English Language Learners (ELLs), can achieve academically.

Research on effective professional development models for teachers of ELLs affirms several requisite components for effective teacher engagement and collaboration, including on-going, job-embedded opportunities for educators to learn, practice, and reflect on their teaching through coaching, mentoring or observations (Castro, 2010; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Focused, evidenced-based conversations about effective classroom practices support teachers in developing knowledge and expertise and provide differentiation, organizational support, and alignment of professional development goals with expectations for implementation (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Walqui, 2001). However, few classroom observational tools exist to support this type of development of teacher expertise for ELLs (Wixman, Padron, Franco-Fuenmayor, & Huang, 2009). Consequently, schools and school systems are experiencing an instructional support gap that results in limited opportunities for educators to analyze, reflect on, and improve research-based practices for ELLs so that outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students can change.

To address this need, an inter-disciplinary research team from the Center for Equity for English Learners’, comprised of educational leaders, teachers, researchers, and content experts developed a classroom observational instrument - the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL). The OPAL is an 18-item Likert-scale developed from a theoretical model based on four constructs: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. It was developed for use in pre-school through twelfth grade second language development and content area classrooms, namely English Language Development, Language Arts (English and Foreign Language), Mathematics, History/Social Science, and Science. The OPAL is intended for teachers, educational leaders, coaches, and others to conduct focused classroom observations for three potential purposes: research/evaluation, professional development, and coaching.

A Research-Based Classroom Observation Tool

The OPAL is a research-based classroom observation tool that captures classroom practices and interactions from sociocultural and language acquisition perspectives. This observation protocol utilizes a six-point Likert-type scale (1-6, Low to High) to describe instruction for academic Literacies, defined as a set of 21st century skills, abilities, and dispositions developed through the affirmation of and in response to students’ identities, experiences and backgrounds. It is aligned with the National and California Standards for the Teaching Profession and encapsulates the four domains of research on teacher expertise for English Language Learners: Rigorous & Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. Table 1 provides an overview of the OPAL Domains and a synthesis of the indicators corresponding to each domain.

Three broad areas of research were used to establish the OPAL’s theoretical framework. First, we considered sociocultural issues in English Language Learner education, given that teaching and learning English in the United States cannot be conceptualized exclusively through the exploration of language theories and methods. At its centrality are concepts such as the relationship between language majority and language minority groups, perceptions of language status, immigration, economics, and language planning and policies (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Cummins, 1991). Effective instruction for ELLs must consider the historical, social and political contexts within which we develop, define, and implement curriculum and instructional practices for ELLs. As an extension of this, a classroom observation tool must not only consider the quality of instruction, teacher expertise, and instructional program, but also the ability to address micro-level contacts ELLs have with others on a daily basis.

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Research on effective professional development models for teachers of ELLs affirms several requisite components for effective teacher engagement and collaboration, including ongoing, job-embedded opportunities for educators to learn, practice, and reflect on their teaching through coaching, mentoring or observations (Castro, 2010; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Focused, evidenced-based conversations about effective classroom practices support teachers in developing knowledge and expertise and provide differentiation, organizational support, and alignment of professional development goals with expectations for implementation (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002, Walqui, 2001). However, few classroom observational tools exist to support this type of development of teacher expertise for ELLs (Wixman, Padron, Franco-Fuensmayor, & Huang, 2009). Consequently, schools and school systems are experiencing an instructional support gap that results in limited opportunities for educators to analyze, reflect on and improve research-based practices for ELLs so that outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students can change.

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Table 1. OPAL Domains, Definitions, and Description of Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPAL Domains</th>
<th>Description of Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0 Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum</td>
<td>1.1 Emphasizes problem solving and critical thinking 1.2 Provides access to materials, technology and resources 1.3 Establishes high expectations 1.4 Organizes curriculum and teaching 1.5 Provides access to content in primary language 1.6 Facilitates transfer of skills from primary language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 Connections</td>
<td>2.1 Relates instructional concepts to students’ realities 2.2 Helps students make connections 2.3 Makes learning relevant and meaningful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 Comprehensibility</td>
<td>3.1 Scaffolds instruction 3.2 Amplifies student input 3.3 Explains key terms 3.4 Provides feedback and checks for comprehension 3.5 Uses informal assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0 Interactions</td>
<td>4.1 Facilitates student autonomy 4.2 Modifies procedures to support learning 4.3 Communicates subject matter knowledge 4.4 Uses flexible groupings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A second area of research important to the development of the OPAL is teacher expertise in second language literacy and acquisition. The National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth (August, & Shanahan, 2006) examined the relation between general language skills, content-specific literacies, and content learning for ELLs. They concluded that ELLs who have a higher level of academic language development performed better on literacy tasks in all content areas. Additionally, students who participated in programs that emphasized the use and development of primary language skills showed an increase in the acquisition of second language literacy. However, there is a lack of research to inform practice as to how educators can best develop reading and writing abilities (National Research Council, 1998). Gibbons (2002), Cummins (2000), August and Hakuta (1997) and Short (1994) contend that from sociocultural and language acquisition perspectives.

Students who participated in programs that emphasized the use and development of primary language skills showed an increase in the acquisition of second language literacy.

A condition for the use of the OPAL is the adequate training of the observers (Roberson, 1998). Key studies on classroom observations indicate that the skill, bias, and preparation of the observers are essential factors that affect the accuracy of results and the extent to which an instrument such as the OPAL can be used to promote reflective teaching and learning through professional development, coaching, and/or research and evaluation (Douglas, 2009). Consequently, special attention must be given to issues of training and inter-rater reliability.

As part of the OPAL Training Modules, an observation guide was developed to establish guidelines with consideration for time, process, and procedures. Classroom observations are pre-arranged and range from 20-30 minutes in duration. A purpose and/or focus for each observation is determined prior to the observation. This is an essential part of the process given that the OPAL can be used to support district-wide, school-wide, or collaborative teacher development efforts. The observer uses the OPAL observation form to provide feedback for the classroom teacher in the form of a rubric score (if agreed upon prior to the visitation) and anecdotal notes based on evidence noted from the observation. Anecdotal notes provide objective statements about classroom practices, interactions, resources, and student engagement.

In the next section, we discuss ways in which developing a common language based on focused OPAL observations have been used to move the conversation regarding effective practices for English Language Learners forward. We address three main potential purposes for applying OPAL results in these conversations: 1) for coaching purposes and 2) for informing broader professional development, and 3) for research purposes.
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The OPAL is a research-based classroom observation tool that captures classroom practices and interactions for learning in the 21st century. Further, a sociocultural approach serves to counter negative and deficit orientations regarding ELLs that stem largely from pointing to what they do not know and are not able to do as evidenced by standardized assessments (Abedi, 2007; Lucas & Beresford, 2010). Accordingly, notions such as subtractive and additive bilingualism, which either seek to eliminate (or subtract) the first language of students or augment the home languages of students (additive approaches) are part of the sociocultural context for learning English and illustrate the complex relationship between the development of the primary language and the second language from the standpoint of language status (Lucas & Beresford, 2010; Rumberger & Gandara, 2009). Thus, sociocultural approaches for ELLs are additive, consider contexts for learning, include appropriate teacher practices/opportunities to learn, and examine status issues as important variables in education (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008; Santamaría, 2009).

The OPAL – Alignment to Teaching Standards

Creating a standards-based classroom observation tool required careful examination of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Department of Education, 1997, 2009) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This was a critical phase in the OPAL’s development process and ensured a correlation between the purpose of the instrument and the potential support for teacher reflection and continued professional development.

Using the OPAL

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A total of 381 classrooms were sampled from 14 PROMISE schools in the southern California region, wherein reside over 65% of the 1.6 million English Language Learners in the state. These schools service students in Preschool through grade 12, and represent the full spectrum of educational situations for ELLs, from schools where as few as 14.7% of the students are socio-economically disadvantaged (SED), to schools where as many as 86.5% of the students are SED.

Aggregate OPAL scores were calculated, maintaining the anonymity of individual classroom teachers and schools, and providing an overall picture of the effects of the PROMISE Initiative on classroom practices. PROMISE Leadership groups comprised of district, school, and county-level representatives were presented mean scores for each of the OPAL Domains and provided with patterns and themes that emerged from the anecdotal notes recorded during OPAL-based classroom observations. The following key findings summarize the PROMISE Classroom Impact Study:

1. Overall, quantitative data from the OPAL observations reveal low to middle-range ratings across the observed domains: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. Ratings were lowest in the areas of Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum and Interactions.

2. Findings around teachers’ practices and perceptions about planning and delivery of curriculum revealed that teachers, especially at the elementary and middle school levels are challenged by many of the pacing plans that are part of the curriculum delivery in many low performing schools. Additionally, observations and interviews revealed that there is limited use of supplemental materials that are linguistically, developmentally, and culturally appropriate for a diverse student population.

3. OPAL observations and teacher interview results indicate that the predominant method of instructional delivery was teacher directed, allowing few opportunities for student-to-student interaction, student-to-teacher interaction, and differentiated instruction. Limited interactions often affected opportunities for students to engage in meaningful and purposeful learning in order to process, internalize, and solidify concepts and skills.

Many teachers reported that the PROMISE Initiative emphasized an additive approach to working with ELLs and provided a unique opportunity to collaborate with peers and create structures for learning about and addressing the needs of English Language Learners. Additionally, teacher interview data showed that most teachers acknowledged a need for additional professional development in the area of effective instruction for ELLs and recognized the possibilities of focused professional development, but also requested more support and focus in the effort.

An extension of the OPAL can provide researchers an opportunity to conduct teacher interviews to expand on observed classroom practices focused around the OPAL’s four domains. The team of CEEL researchers interviewed 177 teachers using a semi-structured interview protocol to introduce the following questions:

1. What professional development has most impacted your teaching practices with English Learners?

2. Relevant and Rigorous Curriculum
   Your lesson today was on (interviewer inserts specific point from observation). How do you plan to ensure that you differentiate instruction for ELs?
   How do you make decisions about the curriculum you teach?

3. Comprehensibility
   When you were (interviewer inserts specific point from observation), what strategies were you using to make sure that students understood what you were teaching?

4. Connections & Praxis
   What strategies do you use to help ELs make connections to content or daily lives?

5. Interactions
   How do you handle the grouping of students in your classroom? What has been most successful?

6. Do you have any questions for us?
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We’ve been introduced to various professional development sessions. It shouldn’t be just for English Learners. We also differentiate across the curriculum, across grade levels and with common assessments. [Middle School Teacher]

I don’t think I’m an expert in teaching English Learners. I think the teacher workshops are helpful. I don’t agree with everything they portrayed, but I am willing to learn and would like more help in my teaching. [High School Teacher]

We have applied only a few of the strategies, but I see a big difference from last year to this year. We should continue the focus. [Elementary School Teacher]

I felt as if my lens was out of focus. I could see things that I had never noticed before. I saw inequity in the system that I possibly was aware of, but hadn’t realized... With this PD (professional development), I suddenly realized that these are different techniques and they may be appropriate in a regular-class, but if you use them in the right way you can move students very quickly so that the playing field is leveled. [High School Teacher]

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6. Do you have any questions for us?
Almost all teachers welcomed the opportunity for professional growth and readily identified additional professional development programs/efforts targeting teaching and learning for English Language Learners. Many teachers identified the need for guidance and professional development in the area of students grouping to promote more varied and positive classroom interaction. Several teachers also named specific training programs such as Project GLAD, Project WRITE, Step Up to Writing, Systematic ELD, and others that provide a structure and guidance for promoting comprehensibility through instructional scaffolds, targeted vocabulary instruction, and formulaic oral and written processes. Gathering focused information about the effects of a program implementation such as the PROMISE Initiative can lead to effectively retooling teachers to utilize and implement practices that positively affect the school-wide culture for teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

Conclusion

Given the national achievement gap between ELLs and their native English speaking peers, the OPAL, when used appropriately in supportive and guided professional development settings, can serve as a vehicle for examining and refining dynamic teaching and learning situations in US schools. As such, the OPAL can be used in a variety of settings to support professional development, conduct research/evaluation, or focus on issues directly related to the school environment.

Endnotes

1 The Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) was established at LMU in 2006. The Center’s Mission is to pursue equity and excellence in the education of English Learners by pursuing research, advancing theory, and providing professional development. For more information, please visit http://soe.lmu.edu/centers/ceel.htm.

2 Six school sites from the Los Angeles Unified School District are participating in the CABE/JP Morgan Chase Grant for 2010.

3 The PROMISE Initiative (Pursuing Regional Opportunities for Excellence) is a California Department of Education (CDE) initiative that promotes regional excellence and professional development in effective ELD instructional delivery. For more information about the PROMISE Initiative, please visit http://www.cde.ca.gov/mn/ac/equity/promis.htm.


5 The Multilingual Educator is available online at http://www.cde.ca.gov/mn/ac/equity/promis.htm.

6 Students in the 21st Century, in order to succeed and be forceful powers in our communities, have to be academically prepared, multilingual, multi-culturally competent, technologically and information literate, civically oriented, excellent communicators, socially and environmentally responsible, and possess the skills and abilities necessary for their community (Sánchez 2002). If students only have monolingual language skills they will be less competitive in a global society and economy.

In twentieth century America, a commonly heard regret was about not having taken the time to learn a foreign language or a pledge to learn one when things ‘quiet down a little.’ Generally speaking, the U.S. remained a monolingual society and it did not matter too much in the business world because of our preeminent position. Now, as we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the world has changed considerably. It continues to “flatten” and the U.S. must use all available tools to retain its economic leadership. California’s leadership has also changed considerably. We have a wealth of languages spoken around us. The majority of our student population now comes from our major trading partners and daily retail shoppers. These include Central America, China, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Multilingualism is an important tool and opportunity for California. In forty school districts and County Offices of Education, California students may now receive the Seal of Biliteracy or Pathway Award Toward Biliteracy Attainment Certificate with their diplomas. Criteria for attaining the Seal of Biliteracy ensure that students are truly biliterate, and the recognition presents students’ important added skills in job markets. The Pathway Award Toward Biliteracy Attainment Certificate is designed for students in grades K-8 who demonstrate effort and skill in learning both English and one or more other languages.

Multiple skills in the workforce also provide employers valuable added business assets in world and California marketplaces. Multilingual employees can not only talk to customers and trading partners in their languages, but also possess deeper insights into important cultural mores. Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Jack O’Connell (2006-2010) states, “Preparing all students with 21st century language and communication skills is critical for being college and career ready. These students will be equipped to be leaders in the areas of international trade, the global economy and public service vital to our diverse communities.”