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Teaching English to Immigrant Students in the United States: A Brief Summary of Programs and Methods

La enseñanza del inglés a estudiantes inmigrantes en Estados Unidos: Un breve resumen de programas y métodos

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Abstract

Nearly ten per cent of the students currently attending public schools in the United States are classified as *English Language Learners* (ELL); that is to say, students who are learning English. The most important challenge this population brings to the educational authorities of their school districts and the schools they attend, is to find the most effective ways to teach them both English and the academic content pertaining to their grade. Since the methods traditionally used did not teach them either the vocabulary or the content needed for subjects such as Math or Science, they fell behind their English-

speaking peers. It was necessary, then, to evolve toward a better integration of the language and the lesson content. The present article summarizes the objectives of the traditional methods, details the changes that have taken place in the last decades to improve the simultaneous teaching of English and academic content, and concludes with an explanation of the techniques most used today.

Keywords: Second language learning, teaching a second language, educational policy, minority groups, language skills, immigrants.

Resumen

Actualmente, cerca del diez por ciento de los alumnos matriculados en escuelas públicas estadounidenses están clasificados como *English Language Learners* (ELL), es decir, alumnos que están aprendiendo inglés. El reto más importante que plantea esta población a las autoridades educativas de los distritos escolares y de las escuelas a las que asisten es cómo hallar la manera más efectiva de enseñarles tanto el inglés como los contenidos académicos correspondientes al grado que cursan. Dado que los métodos utilizados tradicionalmente no les enseñaban ni el vocabulario ni los contenidos necesarios para aprender asignaturas como matemáticas o ciencias, estos alumnos quedaban retrasados académicamente respecto a sus compañeros angloparlantes. Por tanto, era necesaria una evolución hacia una mayor integración de la enseñanza del idioma y de los contenidos. El presente artículo resume los objetivos de los métodos tradicionales, detalla los cambios de las últimas décadas para mejorar la enseñanza simultánea del inglés y de los contenidos académicos y concluye con una explicación de las técnicas más usadas en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de segundo idioma, enseñanza de segundo idioma, política educativa, grupos minoritarios, habilidades de lenguaje, inmigrantes.

Introduction

The number of students enrolled in public schools in the United States in grades kindergarten through 12 has increased considerably in the last decade, going from 43,134,517 students during the 1991-92 school year to 48,296,777 in 2001-02 (Padolsky, 2002a). About 10% of this population were English language learners (ELL), i.e. students who are learning English, and therefore cannot be placed in classrooms where instruction is given in this language only (Nieto, 2000). This is precisely the group of students that has grown faster in the time period mentioned above; their numbers have almost doubled, going from 2,430,712 students in 1992 to 4,747,763 today (Padolsky, 2002a).

The linguistic and cultural diversity of these students is remarkable. They represent approximately 400 different cultures and languages, of which the most common are Spanish (79%), Vietnamese (2%), Hmong (1.6%), Chinese (1%), and Korean (1%). Another 34 languages are spoken by more than 5,000 students respectively, and the rest by a total of 150,000 (Padolsky, 2002b).

The lack of English proficiency of ELL students, together with their different scholastic experiences in their countries of origin and their specific cultural features present many challenges for the U.S. educational system. Most important, without a doubt, is to find the best way to teach them simultaneously both the new language and the academic content of the grade in which they are enrolled, so that they do not fall behind their English-speaking peers (Ovando, Collier and Combs, 2003).

More than a few have been the programs and methods used in the United States over time, and having this objective. This article summarizes the most prevalent, explains the changes that have taken place in the teaching of *English as a Second Language* (ESL) in the last two decades, and describes the techniques used today in all grades of compulsory education (K-12), including even adult education. It also includes some of the risks arising from the adoption of the new federal education law *No Child Left Behind*. The article concludes with suggestions for improving the components of programs designed for use in the education of immigrant students both now and in the future, in the United States and other countries that are beginning to be affected by similar situations.

Traditional programs and methods

Traditionally the most widely used educational program throughout the compulsory schooling (grades K-12) of ELL students has been immersion, i.e., placing these students in classes taught in English, and with English-speaking classmates. This program, also known as *sink or swim*, did not include any special way to help non-English-speaking students understand their teachers' explanations (Díaz-Rico and Weed, 2002). As a result, ELLs fell academically behind their peers who spoke English, and many of them chose to leave school, thus contributing to a substantial increase in the number of school dropouts (*dropouts*) (Rothstein, 1998).

Dissatisfied with this situation, in the 1970s several groups of parents filed lawsuits against some of the school districts that used this practice. The most important cases (*Lau vs. Nichols*, *Aspira vs. New York*, and *Castaneda vs. Pickard*) affected students of different nationalities (Chinese, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans) and were filed in different parts of the country (San Francisco, New York and Texas, respectively). However, claimants' cases were very similar; they argued that education authorities were not providing the necessary resources to help immigrant students overcome language barriers, which were responsible for their high failure rates. In their verdicts, the judges agreed with those affected, handing down decisions which said that if districts and schools did not linguistically and academically help students who spoke no English, they were denying them equal access to the curriculum as compared to their English-speaking classmates. By means of these decisions, they forced districts to create measures which took into account the needs of ELL students, and to seek more effective ways to assist their learning (Castro Feinberg, 2002; Crawford, 1999). Some verdicts were quite specific (*Aspira vs. New York*; *Serna vs. Portales*) and forced local districts to

implement bilingual programs, while others (Lau vs. Nichols) were general, and only recommended some sort of measure, leaving the final decision in the hands of the local education authorities. Because these depended on factors as diverse as financial resources, training of teachers in the schools, and even support of the school community, there was great dissimilarity in the measures implemented. However, by and large it can be said that the programs used thereafter were the *ESL pullout* and temporary bilingual education (Richard-Amato, 1988, Díaz-Rico and Weed, 2002). The first was implemented in elementary and junior high schools, while bilingual programs were almost all restricted to primary schools.

In the *pullout* programs a teacher specializing in techniques of second language acquisition took students identified as ELLs out of their classrooms for about 45 minutes every day to teach them basic English (*English as a Second Language* or ESL). At the end of this period the students returned to their classrooms, where they received instruction in English only. That is, the *pullout* programs were actually a slight variation of immersion. Temporary bilingual education, however, separated the ELL students by their level of English, and put in front of each class a teacher who spoke their language and specialized in techniques of second language learning. The teacher used the students' native language to explain language, mathematics, social sciences and natural sciences, while using English in physical education, art, music and English as a Second Language (ESL). As students progressed in English, the presence of this language increased while that of the native language decreased until all subjects could be taught entirely in English (Richard-Amato, 1988, Díaz-Rico and Weed, 2002).

The theoretical basis of the two programs was different, but both shared a common feature: they included a course for teaching English (ESL) in their educational curriculum. The next step, therefore, was to find the most appropriate method to achieve this. Among those used for this purpose, the most widespread were the classic, the direct, the Audiolingual, *Total Physical Response* (TPR), the *Communicative Approach* and the *Natural Approach*. Some were simple adaptations of those used in other countries, while others were specifically developed in the United States. A brief overview of each of these, with its theoretical basis and its main objectives appears below.

The classical method (*Grammar Translation*) consisted of the literal translation of texts, and learning the rules of English. All the teacher's explanations, from vocabulary to grammar, were in the students' native language. Therefore, the objective was for students to translate accurately, and to achieve the greatest possible accuracy in reading and writing in English. With these concepts, the aspect of communications in language use was completely overlooked (Brown, 2001).

Around 1880 Franke began to develop a method that emphasized oral communication in a second language (German, in this case) at the expense of grammar, which was taught inductively through the topics of conversation. His main objective was for students to use the new language exclusively, so as to

activate their thought processes in it. The method, originally called *direct*, was later used by Maximilian Berlitz in his schools, which led to its being known by that name as well (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Zainuddin Yahya, Morales-Jones and Ariza, 2002).

The U.S., finding itself involved in World War II, needed almost immediately to have foreign-language speakers who could communicate fluently with people of other nations, including Germans, Italians, Chinese, Japanese and Malays (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This situation gave birth to the Audiolingual Method. Based on behaviorism, the method involved the memorization of dialogues, the repetitive practice of grammatical structures “*drill, drill and more drill*” [Hockett, 1959, quoted in Richards 2001, p. 52] and a strong emphasis on achieving correct pronunciation as necessary steps for mastering the new language (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). However, the limitations of the method was soon evidenced by the students themselves, who complained that the learning process was boring and unsatisfactory. Learners also thought the mastery of morphology and grammatical structure emphasized in the classroom did not provide sufficient resources to get along well in the street (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The influence of behaviorist ideas was also felt in *Total Physical Response* (TPR), created in the mid-1970s by James Asher, and aimed at beginning English learners. Its main objective was to develop oral comprehension by following orders and instructions given and modeled by the teacher. The instructions were very simple at first, but became more complex as students progressed. However, thanks to the visual reinforcement provided by the movements of their teacher and classmates, students could associate the language with actions, and gradually acquire the new vocabulary (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

TPR did not require students to speak English immediately. On the contrary, it allowed them to choose the moment when they felt prepared to contribute to the development of the class. Thus they were not forced to take part before they were ready, and could therefore relax and focus on understanding the instructions.

Concurrently with Asher’s work in England, in England, Widdowson and Cadlin began working on an approach that placed more value on the realm of real communication than on the formal language structures. The result, influenced by the antibehaviorist ideas of Chomsky, was the Communicative Approach, based on three fundamental principles: communication (activities that encourage interaction), tasks (involving students in work related to their own experiences and interests) and meaning (activities for the real use of English). This meant that students would learn by doing, and would use English as their lingua franca from the time they began to learn the language, i.e., in solving problems of logic, engage in classroom debates, or make surveys in the street (Brown, 2001).

These were also the premises of the *Natural Approach*, developed by Krashen and Terrell (1983) in the U.S. The authors stressed the importance of promoting fluency

in the early stages of learning, leaving accuracy for when students were more familiar with the language. Mistakes made by students were considered to be part of the process of acquiring the new language. Thus, Krashen and Terrell recommended that students not be constantly corrected, because continually calling their attention to their mistakes, thus causing them to worry about the correctness of their answers, could seriously limit their future attempts to communicate.

Krashen and Terrell thought that English was learned more simply and effectively when the messages were better understood—that is, when students received what Krashen (1981) called *comprehensible input*. For this to happen, the authors suggested that teachers simplify the lexical load, and facilitate an understanding of the contents they explained through the use of visual aids (charts, diagrams, photographs or practical demonstrations), the repetition of key concepts and the exclusion of idioms, proverbs, sayings and colloquial phrases from their vocabulary.

The Natural Approach introduced two important innovations over previous methods: separating students according to their levels of English (*pre-production, early production, emergent speech, intermediate speech*) and taking into account their specific needs (the authors specifically describe the linguistic characteristics and the most appropriate activities for each level).

The objective of the *Natural Approach*, like that of TPR, was to help students develop enough oral fluency to reach an intermediate level that would allow them later to be turned over fully to regular classroom teachers. The teachers' main complaint was that although both methods were focused on oral language development, both neglected the practice of reading and writing in English, thus hindering the progress of pupils in the academic subjects they taught.

Two other methods used in teaching English were *Suggestopedia* and *The Silent Way* (Brown, 2001, Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Unlike their precursors, both were restricted in their expansion and their acceptance in American schools because of their innate complexity, and because of the difficulties that appeared when they were implemented by a large number of pupils.

Teaching English and academic content

The methods described here were implemented in the ESL course, whose objective was to teach the basics of English to primary or junior high school students who did not speak the language. The course was a step forward in providing help to these students. However, there was little relationship between the vocabulary students learned in it, and the words they needed for mathematics, social sciences or natural sciences. For example, while ESL students were learning colors, numbers and different ways of greeting, their English-speaking classmates were studying the American Civil War or photosynthesis. Criticism of the lack of academic preparation for these classes (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003) provoked a

demand to integrate students' learning of English with the academic content they had to learn at each grade level throughout their schooling.

However, it was not until the end of the 1980s that the first methodological changes emerged in this regard, with the establishment of English based on the content (*Content-based ESL* [Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989; Echevarria and Graves, 2003]). Content-based ESL improved the schooling of ELL students by adding two positive aspects: teaching English through thematic units based on academic subjects, and requiring more collaboration between teachers who taught English and those who taught other subjects. This posed no big problem in elementary school, because just one teacher taught all the subjects. It was a problem, however, in junior high school, where students had several teachers; there, learners' needs could go unnoticed (Echevarria and Graves, 2003). Once the students developed some ability in English, teachers had to use *sheltered English*, a term coined by Krashen (1985) to describe the changes teachers needed to make in their way of speaking in the classroom, for the purpose of facilitating students' understanding (Crandall, 1987).

Krashen's ideas of (1985) formed the basis of an educational model (Krashen, 1985; Krashen, 1996) in which ELL students studied certain subjects (language, social studies, science) in their native language, others in *sheltered English* (mathematics and natural science projects), and others in ordinary English (gymnastics, music and art) until they acquired the fluency to join regular classes taught in that language. For students, the program had positive aspects such as the consideration of their needs and the provision of structured and sequential instruction. However, it had three fundamental problems that left ELL students at a distinct disadvantage in competing academically with English-speaking peers: 1) teachers who taught in *sheltered English* were inadequately skilled, since many of them did not have sufficient theoretical/practical training for a proper implementation of the techniques required; 2) the curriculum was simplified because of the students' lack of English proficiency; and 3) English-speaking teachers view with indifference the language skill of ELL students, once these learners students were transferred to regular classes (Freeman and Freeman, 1995). In light of these difficulties it was necessary to implement a new approach that would not only help teachers to be more effective in their explanations, but would also provide students with an understanding of academic content as well as develop their English skills. The integration of content and language, together with explanation by teachers, and of strategies necessary to ensure that students could complete their tasks were the three basic components of the *Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach* or CALLA (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994, Chamot and O'Malley, 1989).

English through content and content through English

The CALLA represented an innovation in the field of language teaching because it defended the need for teachers to teach students not only *what* they had to learn,

but also *how* to do it best. For the CALLA, based on cognitive psychology, it was not enough to transmit declarative knowledge; the procedures also had to be transmitted. Therefore, in addition to explaining to students the academic content, teachers had to help them improve language proficiency through explicit teaching strategies that could help them improve in both facets. The combination of content, language and strategies offered a greater mastery of the four basic English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), as well as a better understanding of the lessons and a greater effectiveness in carrying out academic tasks such as summarizing, taking notes, comparing, using inductive reasoning, etc.

The theoretical basis of the new approach resulted from research carried out by Chamot and O'Malley in several school districts in some of the country's states. The authors observed the strategies used by teachers who identified their best students in connection with planning or doing their work (e.g. writing, solving math problems or creating tables or charts). Having completed their observations, the researchers classified recurring strategies in three categories: metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective. Metacognitive strategies helped students plan their learning and evaluate personal growth through, for example, searching for important information, getting an idea of the contents of a text or reflecting on learning. Cognitive strategies, meanwhile, had to do with the handling of the materials used in the lessons; for example, learning to infer, knowing how to take notes, making summaries, or developing skills in induction and deduction. Finally, socio-affective strategies helped students learn to ask for help or clarification from their classmates when they worked on joint projects (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).

The line of research initiated by Chamot and O'Malley subsequently contributed to the creation and development of the two terms most used today in the linguistic academic teaching of students classified as English Language Learners: *English Language Development* or ELD; and *Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English*, or *Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English* (SDAIE) (Freeman and Freeman, 1995). Basically, while ELD seeks to develop oral communication and literacy in English through topics relating to the subjects studied, SDAIE is a set of techniques that facilitates students' understanding of academic texts. That is, while ELD teaches English through content, SDAIE explains content through English (Freeman & Freeman, 1995). For example, if the teacher (in both primary and junior high school) is going to teach about the earth's movements in natural science class, during the ELD class she* will teach her students basic vocabulary such as that of the universe, stars, planets, sky and rotation. Later, as part of SDAIE, she will include the use of graphics or photos illustrating the rotation and translation, of Venn diagrams to explain the differences between them, and double-entry tables where students can enter the most important information so as to have

* Translator's note: Before the feminist movement arose, in situations including both genders it was customary to use the masculine pronoun. Today, however, pronouns of both genders are used to avoid what is now seen as sexist language. To avoid the awkwardness of a continual repetition of such forms as "s/he", "his/her", in this paper we shall sometimes use the feminine pronoun, and sometimes the masculine.

a clear and comprehensive overview of the topic. These clarifications will enable them in gaining a better understanding of the texts in their science book when they have to study them.

ELD and SDAIE and are not aimed at the same population. ELD is more appropriate for students with low levels of English, while SDAIE is for those with intermediate or advanced skills. Therefore, to receive appropriate instruction, students must be separated according to their language proficiency.¹ This avoids having students of different levels in the same classroom—which was one of the fundamental problems of traditional methods.

Learning English, and educational policies

The new education law *No Child Left Behind*, adopted in 2001 by the current federal government, has placed special emphasis on two aspects of the education of ELL students: the rapid acquisition of English, and the improvement of its results. On the first point, the law limits the ELL status of the student to a maximum of three years, after which the linguistic aids disappear. As regards the second, the law is full of references to the constant improvement of the academic performance of ELL students and the importance of the responsibility (“*accountability*”) of teachers and schools in the results obtained by students on the annual state tests.

Several studies have shown that the time it takes ELL students to catch up with their English-speaking peers academically is between 5 and 7 years (Faltis and Hudelson, 1998; Marshall, 2002; Ovando, Collier and Combs, 2003). However, the pressure created on teachers by the stipulations of the law has meant that they are obliged to try for an artificial acceleration of their students’ English acquisition. As a result, the differences between ELD and SDAIE has been blurred in many classrooms, where academic content has begun to be taught in English, using SDAIE techniques, when in fact it should continue as classes of language development (ELD) since students do not understand English well, nor have they mastered its four basic skills. The acceleration of the process without taking into account the needs of the students holds back their academic progress, since their lack of fluency has a affects them negatively.

To try to remedy this situation, and with the aim of offering teachers a guide to help them prepare lessons that take into account their students’ linguistic and academic needs, whatever the degree, Echevarria, Vogt, and Short created the *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol*, (SIOP), a more detailed version of an earlier model created by Echevarria and Graves (1998). The SIOP (Echevarria, Vogt and Short, 2000) consists of thirty indicators grouped into three categories (preparation, examination and review/evaluation), each of which focuses on a particular stage of the lesson preparation. The constant presence of SDAIE techniques becomes clear when one examines the various indicators:

1) Preparation of the lesson

- Clearly define objectives of content and language, and ensure that they are appropriate for the students' age.
- Adapt content to students' academic and linguistic needs through the use of supplementary materials.

2) Instruction

- Emphasize key words and the links between students' personal experiences and the content to be learned.
- Clearly explain tasks, using visual aids and gestures, and adapt the explanations to the students' level of knowledge.
- Teach learning strategies and formulate questions that trigger complex reasoning processes (Bloom's Taxonomy).
- Encourage interaction through student participation in work groups of various sizes; allow enough time for learners to answer the questions formulated and use their native language to clarify the most important contents.
- Use graphics, visual aids and tables.
- Organize activities that include listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Evaluate whether the activities used reinforce the objectives of content and language development.

3) Review/Evaluation

- Review the vocabulary and key concepts in various ways, such as the use of graphics or explanations in the students' native language to assess their learning appropriately.
- Evaluate the understanding and learning of the lesson objectives.

The SIOP ensures the coherence and effectiveness of the lessons, and helps to improve the linguistic and academic progress of ELL students. This has been achieved thanks to the union, in a single instrument, of research results carried out in recent years in the field of *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (TESOL). The key findings most important be summarized are the following:

- It is necessary to integrate the teaching of content and language;
- It is important to incorporate the students' personal experiences as a fundamental part of the lesson development. This may provide significant connections with the contents explained in the classroom;
- It is necessary to adapt the content to the students' language proficiency, which does not mean simplifying the academic curriculum they receive;
- Key concepts and terms must be repeated often, especially those that constitute the academic nucleus of the lesson;
- It is essential to provide ELL students with linguistic-visual support (*scaffolding*) that will enable them to progress in reading/writing and in their oral skills.

The SIOP has a solid theoretical basis and is well established scientifically—which in theory guarantees its results. However, it is the practical application of its principles which determines to a large extent, its success or failure. The same can be said, broadly speaking, of what happened with the methods and techniques used to work with the ELL population. That is, you cannot ignore the importance of the human factor in this transition from theoretical ideas to putting those ideas into practice in the classroom. For the introduction to be carried out effectively, it is necessary that all teachers working with ELL students in grades K-12 have adequate training, which includes a knowledge of the main theories of language acquisition, with different methods and techniques for the teaching of second languages and the principles of multicultural education. Fortunately, the education departments of several U.S. states have approved these requirements for all teachers who want to earn their credential and teach in the public system (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2003). This step is essential, because according to the trends shown in recent years, the ELL population will not diminish, nor will it stabilize; on the contrary, it will continue to grow by leaps and bounds in the future.

Conclusions and implications

The methods traditionally used for teaching English to ELL students during their schooling did not teach either the content or the academic vocabulary needed for adequate progress in other subjects, for which reason they continued falling behind their English-speaking classmates. To avoid this problem, classes of English as a Second Language (ESL) have been moving towards a greater integration of language instruction with the academic content of the grades students are in. Implementation of *Content-based ESL*, *Sheltered English* and more recently, ELD and SDAIE, was aimed toward improving the training of ELL students to enable them to compete academically with their classmates.

This move has been positive, but much remains to be done in the education of these students. It is necessary, for example, to continue developing and applying techniques for improving the quality of the linguistic-academic teaching they receive. It also requires a progressive change of mindset among the educators who work with them, in the sense that these educators should recognize themselves both as teachers of language and of academic content, regardless of the subject or the grade level. That is, both ELD and SDAIE should be an integral part of their curriculum. Third, communication (*articulation*) should be improved between the teachers who teach regular English classes and those who teach ELD or SDAIE, to ensure the continuity and consistency of the instruction given. To achieve this goal, everyone should be familiar with the levels of English and the language needs of their students. Finally, it is essential to disseminate information among educators as regards the importance of the three previous points. This can be achieved through continuous training to familiarize teachers with the main cultural features of the different immigrant populations they serve, along with learning the various theories of second language acquisition, and the use of

effective techniques and strategies to provide their students with the development of skills in the language and an understanding of the academic content.

The tour of the various methods described in this paper may serve as a guide for the educational authorities of other countries (e.g. Italy, France, Spain or Germany) that are beginning to see in their schools a significant increase of immigrants who speak other languages. It is our hope that it may help them to find solutions with which to meet the challenges presented by the new situation. Their advantage, compared to the United States, is that they can draw conclusions from the American experience, and benefit from its successes without having to make the same mistakes. In this way they may progress more rapidly in the successful integration of new students entering their classrooms.

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¹ The classification process begins with a *Home Language Survey*, consisting of a few questions about the languages used by students in their homes. These questions need to be answered by all students who are enrolling for the first time in public schools. Students who indicated English as their only language are classified as *English Only* (EO). Those whose native language is other than English must take a test of English proficiency. If they pass, they are classified as *fluent English speakers*. If not, they are classified as *Limited English proficient*, and then divided into five different levels where they will receive instruction tailored to their needs.