

Examining ELA Program Reform through Theory U

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Abstract

As the number of non-native English speakers in U.S. public schools increases, educators face unique challenges in developing programs that support students from all cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. The literature shows that English language acquisition (ELA) programs face numerous obstacles in closing the achievement gap between native and non-native speakers. This paper utilizes Theory U to examine the history of ELA program reform and to make recommendations concerning its future development and growth.

Keywords: ELA, ELL, language acquisition, education reform

Introduction

Across the United States public school system, approximately 9.2% of all students are non-native speakers of English, which means there are 4.4 million non-native English speakers in the American public school system (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Therefore, in order to become fully integrated schools, it is important to consider the English Language Acquisition (ELA)¹ program. While the foundation of ELA focuses on preparing students to read, write, and speak in English, the end goal of the program is a community of students that is fully prepared to participate in a global economy. A successful program produces non-native speakers who are better prepared to communicate in an English-dominated world, while the benefit of ELA for native speakers is the opportunity to grow accustomed to diversity and intercultural communication.

Taking the Denver Public Schools system as an example, we can see that ELA programs are experiencing an increase in the number of students enrolled. In the 2013-2014 school year, 87,398 English language learners (ELLs) were enrolled in 185 Denver Public Schools (Denver Children's Affairs, 2014). According to the Denver Public School District (2016), there were 91,429 ELL students enrolled in 216 schools. These numbers demonstrate that it is necessary to push the education system in the right direction in order to successfully handle this growth in the ELA population. Theory U illustrates how educators and administrators can better address the needs of students by seeing ELA programs as opportunities to facilitate the greater community's acceptance of diversity and collaboration across linguistic, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. To increase the success of ELA programs, American public school boards should implement 90-minute class times instead of 45-minute class times and add a conversational component, which will provide mutually beneficial opportunities for both native and non-native speakers.

¹ In this paper, ELA, ESL, and ELL are used as they are within the research. All are essentially interchangeable.

The Reform

Currently, reformers see the ELA program's key objectives as assisting non-native speakers in using language effectively in a variety of content areas and helping the school community as a whole develop adaptability. As a result, the ELA program can be a cultural bridge while assisting non-native speakers in strengthening their English and native speakers in exchanging knowledge with their peers. Initially, ELA programs arose out of the need to accommodate immigrants, refugees, and even children born in the US who were unprepared to assimilate into an English-speaking culture. The focus of this reform soon shifted to preparing non-native speakers for higher education, but not all non-native speakers are college-bound. Once again, the objective of this reform changed course, focusing on how to close the achievement gap between native and non-native speakers by determining what practices and improvements could best supplement ELA programs. According to Thomas & Collier (2003), schools can expect the achievement gap between non-native speakers and native speakers to close within five to six years when using standardized tests as the methods of assessment. However, their research heavily emphasizes the use of standardized test scores as an instrument for evaluating achievement; instead, other instruments, like some form of conversational assessment, could prove to be more useful and representative of students' abilities. In order to close the gap, researchers have focused on integrating culturally responsive teaching and preparing specialized teachers.

Most public school districts in the United States have instituted ELA programs to accommodate the unique needs of non-native speakers. According to Thomas & Collier (2003), ELA programs are more common in states like Texas, California, New York, and Illinois, which are dominated by minorities and have substantial immigrant populations. It is also important to note that non-native speakers have much to learn and to gain from their participation in ELA programs. Such programs can better prepare non-native speakers to participate in an American school system and learn to communicate with native speakers.

There is much relevant literature that confirms the significance and success of ELA programs for closing the achievement gap between native and non-native speakers. ELL students who do not receive support from an ELA program earn the lowest grades and test scores, thereby dropping out at higher rates than native English speakers (Collier & Thomas, 2002). Closing the gap requires effective implementation of ELA programs. Factors that must be considered include the number of academic years ELLs spend in the program; the integration of ELLs into classrooms with native speakers; opportunities for ELLs to utilize their native languages to aid in comprehension; and the application of collaborative pedagogy (Thomas & Collier, 2003, p. 61). Students who receive instruction and support through ELA programs are eventually able to catch up to, or surpass, their native-speaking counterparts (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005).

English as a second language (ESL) teachers must recognize and understand the influence of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds in order to effectively teach their students. It is widely acknowledged that ESL teachers should be aware of the culture of ELLs in order to help students acquire language (Sifakis, 2004; Haneda, 2008; Haworth, 2008; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Faez, 2011; Hansen-Thomas, Casey, & Grosso, 2013). Sifakis argues for the importance of encouraging ELL students to interact more with native speakers of English in group settings. Haneda suggests that schools function as cultural institutions to offer programmatic support to ELLs, while Haworth sees understanding cultural and linguistic proficiency as a way to enhance teacher proficiency and build communication between educators and students. Durgunoglu and Hughes argue that teachers must be mindful of students' cultural foundations to provide opportunities for them to be active members of the class.

Challenges to this reform mainly stem from a combination of factors that currently limit the success of ELA programs. Sifakis (2004) argues that one major challenge facing ESL teachers is the rapid pace of instruction required in ELA programs. Limited class times of 45 minutes do not provide enough opportunity for non-native speakers to receive the support they need. As noted by Oberg (1993), there is a correlation between student performance and the size and duration of classes. Moreover, Sifakis found that there is a need to increase teachers' awareness of the challenges specific to ESL instruction to better support those students with less time to acquire the language. Durgunoglu & Hughes (2010) observed that educators are not able to help ELL students because of inadequate knowledge or lack of training regarding the needs of ELLs. Both Haneda (2008) and Durgunoglu & Hughes agree that additional preparation is required for teachers in order to help ELLs succeed. In general, even in these short 45-minute increments, ESL teachers may not necessarily specialize in content that students are learning, making it difficult for them to instruct students on how to apply skills like critical thinking or analysis in courses outside of English. Other potential challenges include budgetary considerations and gaining acceptance from stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents.

Theoretical Framework

Theory U allows researchers to examine the evolution of a particular reform. According to Scharmer (2016), the researcher uses each step on the “U” to identify how far a reform has come and to determine what reforms are missing that other reformers can then implement. This paper has established the need for non-native speakers of English who reside in the US to be better prepared, not only academically but also for everyday life in the US. An analysis of ELA program reform through Theory U illustrates that there is a need for more class time in order for teachers to better support non-native speakers. Each step of Theory U shows how the reform has progressed and where it must go from here.

In the Co-Initiating phase of Theory U, reformers must pause and listen to others with the purpose of finding a common interest or goal. Reformers recognized a need to re-examine the ELA system because it did not serve students well. One indicator of this was ELL students’ low performance. Certain groups of non-native speakers were not able to compete with and achieve as much as native speakers because the curriculum was in English instead of their native language.

In the Co-Sensing phase, it is critical that reformers observe their surroundings with an open mind. Through impartial observation, reformers will develop a more holistic picture of how people operate within a system, which will help them to determine how to effect change. Reformers observed that, even with the progress that non-native speakers had made, an achievement gap still existed between non-native and native speakers when using standardized tests as the methods of assessment (Thomas & Collier, 2003). Schools began incorporating ELA programs, but these programs did not require specialized teachers, and these teachers felt unequipped to actually teach students (Hansen-Thomas, Richins, Kakkar, & Okeyo, 2016). These programs recognized the need for ESL teachers, but they also recognized the value of ELL students and their contribution to the school environment and the community at large.

In the Presencing phase, reformers re-examine what inspires them and reposition themselves in relation to their surrounding circumstances to understand what needs to be changed. Giving ESL students the support they need will better equip them to succeed in the United States, which relies on fluency in English. Reformers recognized the need to provide support and time designated for ESL students—45 minutes of time allotted to language acquisition.

In the Co-Creating phase, reformers test out new ideas by applying them in order to see how they perform once they are implemented. These programs began incorporating the students’ cultures and backgrounds into ELA programs and encouraging non-native speakers to interact in a group and with native speakers. They also began incorporating technology into the program as a tool for facilitating English language acquisition.

In the Co-Evolving phase, the reformer aims to facilitate the development of holistically focused ecosystems by embracing new ideas and perspectives. ELL programs accomplished this by letting go of the importance of standardized tests for non-native speakers. Many programs reconsidered requiring non-native students to take these tests, or they required non-native speakers to spend a certain amount of consecutive years in the U.S. school system. According to Thomas and Collier (2003), after integrating culturally responsive teaching, working to understand the needs of non-native speakers, and soliciting support from parents, ELA programs helped to close the gap.

Through Theory U, it is evident that this program can serve native and non-native speakers alike. As a result of applying this theory, it is clear that an effective ELA program will implement and enact Wagner’s (2010) seven survival skills to both these groups of students. By extending class times and integrating a conversational component into these longer classes, native and non-native speakers can simultaneously develop several different skills. These skills are in line with what Wagner argues are essential for success in education and beyond. One such skill is the ability to “access and evaluate information from many different sources” (Wagner, 2010, p. 36). In the context of conversation groups, native speakers can practice using evidence and personal experiences to develop their ability to communicate effectively and confidently in conversation groups. ELA students will also have the opportunity to communicate their perspectives, which will improve their ability to access and analyze information. Part of critical thinking and problem solving involves brainstorming with people who have different perspectives than our own. As Wagner also discusses, this will result in the development of these students’ oral and written communication skills as well as their ability to collaborate across networks and lead by influence. Furthermore, ELA programs can also teach native speakers acceptance of and respect for diversity and cultural differences while reinforcing students’ own initiative and entrepreneurialism.

Both native and non-native speakers can use English as a shared language that they then utilize in order to appeal to their own curiosity and imagination. However, helping students practice and develop each of these skills requires the integration of a conversational component into longer 90-minute classes.

Theory to Action

After examining ELA program reform through the lens of Theory U, researchers must now test the implementation of longer class durations and conversation groups with native speakers in specific ELA programs. Prior to implementing these changes, researchers will need to interview stakeholders regarding the needs and gaps in their programs. Once class times have been extended, ELA teachers will need guidelines for how to instruct students to participate in conversation groups. Initially, teachers will need to give students agency to decide on the topics they are interested in discussing. Over time, the teacher will also need to integrate lessons and concepts from other classes to build critical thinking into discussion and increase retention of knowledge. At different points in the term, the teacher should evaluate the students' speaking proficiency and growth between assessments. These assignments and activities can be opportunities for students to challenge their preconceptions about other cultures, to learn more about American culture, and to break down barriers between themselves and their peers.

Once this action has been implemented, the researcher must assess growth through both quantitative and qualitative assessment in order to determine whether the stakeholders' concerns have been resolved through the reforms. It is important to implement a mixed methods research study to better determine how the longer class times and integration of conversational components into ELA programs impact student growth. The qualitative research will provide access to data that can help determine whether the reforms have addressed the stakeholders' concerns. Through interviews and open ended questions on surveys, it will become clear how to best improve the program.

After the implementation of the previously mentioned reforms, the quantitative component will measure student performance pre-evaluation and post-evaluation. Teachers' perspectives on the value of curriculum is not enough to justify continuing or discontinuing its use, as these perspectives do not require reflexivity regarding one's own methods of teaching and applying curriculum. At the same time, depending on stakeholders to evaluate the program's success creates a conflict of interest. Therefore, quantitative data is necessary to validate their perspectives, the students' growth, and the success of the program.

Recommendations

First, the length of each class must be extended from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Then, with this additional time and support, native speakers must be included in the ELA program. Teachers must provide instruction for students when integrating the conversational component into the classroom. Then, student performance must be assessed in order to ensure that these reforms have addressed the concerns expressed by stakeholders.

Conclusion

There was a clear need for ELA programs, and these programs were established in order to make non-native speakers part of the English-speaking community. Additional 45-minute classes were offered to support non-native speakers in public schools. Initially, non-native speakers performed at much lower levels, which prompted these programs to recognize the need for specialized teachers and the value of preparing students for higher education. These reforms still failed to close the achievement gap; however, few studies, with the exception of Oberg (1993), have considered the possibility of extending the duration of ELA classes in order to provide additional support to non-native speakers. After considering the application of Theory U, it is clear that ELA programs must implement longer class times—90 minutes instead of 45 minutes—for the purpose of integrating a conversational component, which will provide mutually beneficial opportunities for both native and non-native speakers.

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