

The Knowledge Gap:

What Mainstream Teachers Know about Teaching ELLs in the Spokane Public Schools

By Rosa Cordova

The increasing number of refugees and immigrants in Spokane, WA has led to more students designated as English Language Development (ELD) in the Spokane Public Schools (SPS). Mainstream teachers have found it difficult to adapt to the needs of the English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. Frequently, mainstream teachers lack knowledge of successful instructional methodologies, second language acquisition (SLA), as well as an understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. Through an extensive survey and interviews, the knowledge that mainstream teachers of SPS have is analyzed in order to develop an approach to help these mainstream teachers fill the knowledge gap. This article highlights ways that mainstream teachers can work in conjunction with the ELD specialists to become informed about SLA and successful instructional methodologies. It also provides information about how the data gathered can help teachers reflect on their knowledge and understand where they lack knowledge.

According to the SPS website (2015), “the goal of the English Language Development (ELD) Program is to develop the English language proficiency of eligible ELLs so that they can become socially and academically successful.” There are over “65 language groups found in SPS and approximately 1,600 eligible students”, so even though the ELD Program and ELD teachers work hard to

meet the needs of the students, ELLs spend a majority of their time with mainstream teachers, administrators, and classified staff who have not studied SLA or Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). If students spend so much time with mainstream teachers, I couldn’t help but wonder what those teachers knew about TESL and SLA.

Mainstream Teachers, ESL Training, and what they know

Mainstream teachers don’t get much ESL training in their teacher-preparation courses. According to Youngs and Youngs (2001), “mainstream teachers themselves realize that they lack training in ESL and desire more background knowledge,” but mainstream teachers don’t think that supplementary training in ESL is very helpful to them (p. 101). Because of limited teacher training in TESL and SLA in teacher education programs, ELLs are at a distinct disadvantage. Teachers don’t know how to use strategies with ELLs. Those teachers who did have some formal ESL training had a more positive view of teaching ELLs than those who did not (Youngs & Youngs, 2001, p. 102). Although mainstream teachers don’t have much teacher training in SLA or TESL, some teachers who have training in cultural awareness can in some ways compensate with their ELLs. According to Youngs and Youngs, “research suggests that mainstream teachers

often possess misinformation about the native cultures of their ESL students” (p. 98). Often teachers cannot remember their students’ culture or make assumptions about the cultures of their students. Batt (2008) points out how often teachers “lack an understanding of diversity or multicultural education” (p. 40). This is significant because teachers with cultural training are better suited for working with ELLs due to cultural awareness and recognizing different learning styles.

Mainstream teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about ELLs are fairly positive.

Despite having no negative perceptions of working with ELLs, many mainstream teachers tend to not think about them at all or how they should teach them. They do not think that ELLs are detrimental but they do not see it as their responsibility to scaffold, build materials, or work directly with their ELLs in their content area.

How mainstream teachers feel and what they think about their students is very significant because “mainstream teachers’ attitudes toward ESL students are likely to affect what ESL students learn” (Youngs & Youngs, 2001, p. 98).

Survey & Interviews

I used two main methods of data collection: a survey and interviews. The participants of the survey are all professionals in the SPS district and they vary from teachers, administrators, and classified staff. Based off the survey, of the 360 participants 118 are elementary school teachers, 44 are middle school teachers, 69 are high school teachers, and 20 are self-identified ELD teachers. For qualitative research, I interviewed two teachers that work at a local high school in Spokane, Washington. The school year 2015-2016 was the first full teaching year of both teachers. Teacher 1 is an ELD teacher who has a Master’s in Initial Teaching with an ESL endorsement. Teacher 2 is a Math teacher with a Bachelor’s degree in Math and a teacher certification. Teacher 1 is the ELD teacher at the High School and teaches 6 periods of ELD English at the school, while Teacher 2 teaches one ELD Math class.

Teacher 1 had much to say in terms of his knowledge about the particular terminology used in the TESL field. Teacher 2 showed that although he lacked explanations for many of terms, he still had some experience in the field. The most notable differences are as follows: knowledge about sheltered instruction, knowledge about BICS and CALP, and experience with SLA. Teacher 1 had very detailed definitions for each of the terms brought up. Teacher 2 expressed hesitation about almost every term that I asked him about.

Looking at the survey results, 64.7 percent of all 360 participants in the survey said that they worked with ELLs on a daily basis. Of the 360 participants 309 of them claimed to have experience with cultural differences, 209 claimed experience with socioeconomic differences. The participants were least familiar with sheltered instruction, which is notable since sheltered instruction is largely a k-12 concept. As anticipated, most participants did not have experience with the terms BICS and CALP since they are field-specific terminology.

Discussion

What teachers know about SLA/TESL impacts how teachers perceive their ELLs, and what they can do to help them. Based on the survey results, teachers often feel like they do not have the resources to help their students themselves. These survey and interview results provide us researchers with the opportunity to fill that knowledge gap for mainstream teachers in Spokane. We can create more teacher trainings to enable the mainstream teachers of SPS to learn about cultural awareness, SLA and TESL in general. In particular, when asked what information professionals in SPS would like to know so that they can work more effectively with their ELLs, most professionals and teachers answered that they would like to know more about the students culturally. De Jong and Harper (2005) argue “in order to understand the potential for inequity in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, teachers must understand their own cultural identity and the cultural assumptions that underlie their instruction as well as those of their students and their families (p. 111). As a district, SPS needs to educate its mainstream teachers about the cultures of their students and their own culture to be able to see the differences between both cultures and how to negotiate compromises in the classroom. Youngs and Youngs (2001) also argue that

“teachers and other helping professionals must possess a concrete awareness of cultural differences and of specific cultural groups in order to work effectively with students and clients from different cultural backgrounds” (p. 100).

By creating trainings that address these needs SPS can develop the concrete awareness that can help teachers cultivate better strategies in working with ELLs. In educating their mainstream teachers about the cultures of their students, they can continue to encourage positive attitudes towards English language teaching. Various researchers suggest that to inform mainstream

teachers in region where the ELL population is constantly increasing, “teacher education must give higher priority to include coursework in diversity issues and ESL methods for all teachers” (Batt, 2008, p. 41).

In order for SPS teachers to educate their ELLs more efficiently, in-service teacher training needs to focus on sharing strategies and SLA theory. Teacher trainers need to incorporate the strengths of mainstream teachers to inform them how to scaffold their materials and help their students with literacy development. Teacher training should focus on building on the knowledge that is already there. In the survey results, it is easy to see that there is a basis of SLA theory in the district even if the mainstream teachers do not know the field terminology. Teacher training “must include helping teachers to build on their knowledge about language, i.e., develop their understanding of how English works as a linguistic system that is influenced by social, cultural, and academic contexts of use and by multiple learner variables” (De Jong, 2005, p. 93). Increasing teacher training is the most beneficial thing for ELLs that SPS can do, which is why I intend to assist with training in the SPS ELD department to develop trainings that focus on cultural awareness, scaffolding strategies, and basic SLA theory.

References

- Batt, E.G. (2008). Teachers’ perceptions of ELL education: Potential solutions to overcome the greatest challenges, *Multicultural Education*, 15(3), 39-43.
- De Jong, E.J., Harper, C.A., & Coady, M.R. (2013) Enhanced knowledge and skills for elementary mainstream teachers of English language learners. *Theory Into Practice*, 52(2),89-97.
- De Jong, E. J., & Harper, C. A. (2005). Preparing mainstream teachers for English-language learners: Is being a good teacher good enough? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 32(2), 101-124.
- Youngs, C. S., & Youngs, G. A.. (2001). Predictors of mainstream teachers’ attitudes toward ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 97-120. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3587861>
- About Our ELD Program. (2015). Retrieved May 05, 2016, from <http://www.spokaneschools.org/Page/1499>