Preparing Teacher Candidates to work with Language Learners:
Innovations in a Literacy Methods Course

As we move toward our global future in an increasingly diverse society, the importance of schools as effective centers for multiple language learners intensifies. Many of the growing number of bilingual students in our K-8 schools will spend all or part of their school day in general education or mainstream classrooms with teachers who do not speak the primary language of the students and who have had little or no training in strategies to help engage and support the learning of language learners.

The time for innovations in how we prepare teachers to work with language learners is past due and needs to become a focus in teacher education programs. Mainstream teacher education programs are attempting to address this challenge in a variety of ways including: adding a single course or field experience to an existing curriculum (Walker, Ranney, & Fortune, 2005); revising existing courses or field experiences to incorporate attention to teaching language learners (Friedman, 2002); adding a minor or supplemental certificate program to a standard certificate (Brisk, Horan, & Macdonald, 2007); innovating program structures that foster collaboration among mainstream, bilingual and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers, and teacher candidates (Evans, Arnot-Hopffer, & Jurich, 2005); and providing professional development for teacher education faculty (Gort, Glenn, & Settlage, 2007). All of these approaches have the goal of better preparing future teachers for the students they will teach.

Ideally, all new P-8 teachers would have intensive training and specific courses in working with language learners. At the same time, teacher preparation programs are expected not to increase time to degree – a challenge that may seem beyond reach. Yet a more targeted approach, specifically a focus on explicit mini-lessons coupled with an ESL support framework,
delivered within our regular literacy methods courses provides us with an example of one manageable possibility.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers need a way to manage differentiation of instruction including supports for the success of language learners. Our mini-lesson framework contains critical elements of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol’s (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) research-based model for planning lessons that effectively shelter the instruction of language learners. The SIOP model and the research base on which it is developed are widely embraced by K-12 English language specialists and school districts across our region. Within the eight main components of SIOP, there are a total of 30 sub-components that teachers are to consider when planning with the SIOP protocol. While ideal and perhaps possible for the segregated ESL classroom, this manner of planning is difficult for the mainstream elementary teacher, especially for new teachers responsible for multiple lessons in different content areas for a range of learners throughout each day. Our model incorporates the SIOP framework into a manageable mini-lesson format realistic for K-8 mainstream classroom teachers (see Table 1). In addition, the gradual release of responsibility, described for many years by educational researchers Pearson and Gallagher (1983) and adapted and revised by many others, including Calkins (2008), Mooney (1990), Fountas and Pinnell (1996), and more recently by Fisher and his colleagues, (Fisher, Rothenberg, & Frey, 2007) form the base of both the mini-lesson and SIOP frameworks which we have blended. Basically, the gradual release of responsibility is an instructional model that requires that the teacher, by design, transition from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke
& Pearson, 2002, p. 211). In the educational world this is often referred to as “I do, we do, you do, you do on your own” or “modeled, guided, independent practice.”

The SIOP protocol and publications also draw attention to “language objectives” which include the forms and purposes of school language. In order to succeed, language learners must understand both the form (structure) and the function (purpose) of the English language. While considering the language necessary for students to have success with content has been part of second language acquisition foci for many years, it is relatively new to mainstream classroom thinking. Including a focus on not only the content objective, but also the language objective in our framework assists students to consider what we are asking students to do in the mainstream classroom and the support that may be needed for all students to have access to the content.

The lesson format we present emphasizes explicit instruction (Paris, Wixson, & Palincsar, 1986) drawing on the research that suggests a teacher’s job is to clearly explain strategies so that students can see the purpose and sense behind them. Finally, the shared ideas of “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978), instructional level (Clay, 1992), and comprehensible input + 1 (Krashen, 1994) are incorporated into our lesson format.

**Background**

In our teacher candidates’ first year, they take a required course in which they are introduced to the book, *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol* (Echevarria et al., 2008), among myriad other introductions for supporting a range of students. The teacher candidates report being assigned the SIOP book as a reading, but they walk away reporting little understanding of SIOP and a lack of knowing how to use sheltered instruction strategies to support language learners in mainstream classrooms. We wanted all our students to have better understandings of how to support language learners, and the opportunity to put the SIOP
principles into action in a way that would work in mainstream classrooms. We could not add a course to our long teacher preparation program, but we could revise a course and the associated fieldwork to better meet the needs of our teacher candidates and link to their previous exposure to SIOP.

During our teacher candidates’ second quarter-long literacy course, we now focus on an explicit mini-lesson framework with modifications for ELL learners. Our first intentional focus on language learners came when we added content and a book called *Becoming One Community* (Fay & Whaley, 2004). Reading and discussing the book helped our teacher candidates to deepen their understandings about what students need to have in a classroom setting in order to be successful. When students were planning, teaching, and reflecting on explicit mini-lessons we were not, however, seeing evidence of effective sheltered instruction within the mainstream lessons. We switched to a book written with our teacher candidates’ growth in mind, *English Language Learners in Literacy Workshops* (Riddle Buly, 2011) because this resource provides clear explanation and modeling of how the explicit mini-lessons can be modified within the mainstream classroom to more effectively include sheltered instruction strategies. One feature of the new book that we found particularly helpful is the alignment suggested by Riddle Buly between the 30 features of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol and the six areas of an explicit and gradually released mini-lesson (see Table 1).
Table 1: Possible alignment between the format of a literacy workshop and the SIOP model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Workshop</th>
<th>Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) <strong>Connect/PURPOSE</strong></td>
<td>Clearly state language and content objectives for students. Choose concepts appropriate for students. Explicitly link concepts to students’ backgrounds and experiences. Emphasize key vocabulary. Use speech appropriate for students’ proficiency level. Explain academic tasks clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What, Why, When</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2) <strong>Model/Provide Information</strong></td>
<td>Use supplementary materials to a high degree to make the lesson clear and meaningful. Use scaffolding techniques throughout the lesson. Use a variety of techniques to make content concepts clear.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>How</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3) <strong>Guided Practice</strong></td>
<td>Provide ample opportunities for students to use the strategies (also in independent work). Provide frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion about lesson concepts between teacher and student and among students. Provide sufficient wait time. Use group configurations that support the objectives. Provide activities that integrate all language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Engage students 90 to 100% of the lesson. Pace the lesson appropriately to the students’ ability level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) <strong>Link to Independent Work</strong></td>
<td>Adapt content to all levels of student proficiency. Provide hands-on materials or manipulatives for students to practice using new content knowledge. Provide activities for students to apply knowledge in the classroom. Provide feedback to students regularly. Conduct assessments of student comprehension and learning throughout the lesson.</td>
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<td><em>practice during independent reading</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>5) <strong>Sharing (at the end of the workshop)</strong></td>
<td>Use a variety of thinking skills throughout the lesson.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6) <strong>Close (at the end of the workshop)</strong></td>
<td>Review key vocabulary and concepts.</td>
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Using the suggested alignment and the detailed description of mini-lessons, we model and break down each component of the lesson in this framework in the methods class. The teacher education students in our class then watch mini-lessons modeled by expert classroom teachers with their own diverse language students. Afterward, we debrief with the pre-service teachers about the support that the master teacher has included (or could include) to better support the language learners in a particular classroom. Then our teacher education students work with small groups of students to support and extend the classroom teachers’ mini-lessons. Finally, pre-service teachers write their own explicit mini-lessons focused on the students they are working with, teach those lessons, and later, in class, analyze their instruction, identifying how their lessons could have even better supported language learners.

Because we are constantly working to determine the outcomes of our work with pre-service teachers, we wanted to examine the effects of implementing this framework as a part of the literacy methods preparation coursework. To do so, we developed the current study focusing on the following research question: How do teacher candidates’ understandings of ways to support language learners in mini-lessons change as a result of this coursework?

Method

Participants in this study included two sections of K-8 teacher candidates taking their second quarter-long literacy methods course (38 total) and two university professors. The first group took the course during the 10-week spring quarter of 2011 while the second group took the course a few months later, during fall quarter of 2011. All teacher candidates come into the course having had an introduction to mini-lessons in their initial literacy methods course. Both sections received support in planning and delivering explicit mini-lessons in a field experience as well as the opportunity to reflect on that experience, and both sections included a text that
describes integration of English language learners in the reading and writing workshop. The second group, however, also received a focus on understanding the parallels between the SIOP protocol and the mini-lesson framework, as well as specific modifications supportive of English language learners. Most students in this second group had opportunities to plan and deliver the modified explicit mini-lessons in a field experience with a linguistically diverse student population.

We administered pre/post assessment tasks to both teacher candidate groups at the beginning and at the end of the quarter. The tasks were described to the teacher candidates as a way for us to assess our teaching and it was clear that the tasks were not used in grading. We gave the following pre-assessment prompt on the first day of class:

Please plan a mini-lesson focused on teaching students how to line up at the door. Include as many steps as you believe students will need or that you have been taught are necessary. If there are labels for sections that you remember, please include those. Explicitly include how you would address English language learners within your instruction. If you need additional paper feel free to add to this. Please use only your brain as a resource.

We chose to focus the prompt on teaching a management strategy because we wanted to separate teacher candidates’ understanding of the mini-lesson structures and supports for language learners from their understanding of literacy content. We considered the possibility that a prompt focused on reading comprehension or writing process, for example, might be new or challenging at the beginning of the quarter and would mask teacher candidates’ ability to focus on, and demonstrate, their knowledge about the explicit instruction framework.
At the end of the quarter, we administered the post-assessment task. In this task we asked teacher candidates to revisit their mini-lesson from the pre-assessment; review the original directions; then (using a different color) make any additions, deletions, or revisions they wanted. Finally, in the post-assessment task we asked teacher candidates to reflect on the following questions:

1) If you made revisions to your lesson, why did you make those revisions?

2) What lingering questions do you have about explicit mini-lessons?

3) What is a key take-away related to mini-lessons?

Teacher candidates were given as much time as they needed in class, without resources, to complete both the pre- and post-tasks. Our graduate assistants collected and numbered the responses so that individual participants were not linked to data sets.

We analyzed the data by independently reviewing each group’s pre- and post-assessments. We looked for patterns in what knowledge teacher candidates were bringing to the course related to explicit mini-lessons and supports for English language learners, then for patterns in changes candidates made to their mini-lessons in the post-assessments. Although we were primarily interested in analyzing pre/post changes in teacher candidates’ thinking related to supporting language learners, we also compared the two groups. Because we did not match the groups we wouldn’t be able to draw any conclusions, but we were interested to see if the additional work on the SIOP alignment would show in teacher candidate responses.

The independent analyses were then compared in order to confirm patterns in the responses where possible. Finally, we analyzed teacher candidates’ responses to the reflection questions for themes that would help us understand what sense they were making of this central element in the course.
Findings

The data indicates that across both groups, teacher candidates’ sense of efficacy and demonstrated understanding of the framework for mini-lessons increased. We found that in the course section with the explicit focus on strategies for supporting English language learners, teacher candidates’ learning trajectories appeared to be positively affected by opportunities to re-examine mini-lessons in connection with SIOP alignment. In addition, their sense of efficacy about supporting language learners shows evidence of increasing.

Explicit Mini-Lessons

Our review of pre-assessments suggested that teacher candidates entered the course with a rough idea of the structure of a mini-lesson. Specifically, they seem to have internalized the idea that mini-lessons incorporate a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student. For example, many of the lessons were labeled with some version of the following parts: introduction, I do, we do, you do, and conclusion. Most also understood that the “I do” portion of the lesson required demonstration of the activity, and a few even added that they would “talk through,” “explain,” or “think aloud” as they showed students what to do. Teacher candidates’ descriptions of the “we do” and “you do” portions of the lessons focused on the idea of “practice” either alongside or in the presence of the teacher.

The two areas of mini-lessons that received the most revisions in the post-assessment were in the section teacher candidates originally titled “introduction” and in the section they titled “conclusion.” When teacher candidates revised the lesson, they made three types of changes to their introductions. First, those who had not already done so made sure to include a statement providing a rationale for the lesson. For example, one respondent added “We line up at the door so that when we travel through the halls we can stay as a group and not disturb others.”

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As one teacher candidate noted in her reflection, “I learned about the importance of stating the ‘why’ or the importance of a lesson so I made sure to add that.” Second, some teacher candidates added a “when” statement to the introduction. An example is a teacher candidate who revised the introduction to include the sentence, “We line up whenever our class must leave the classrooms – lunch, recess, going home, field trips, etc.” Both of these changes – adding the “why” and the “when” constitute providing the learner with conditional knowledge of the strategy being taught, an important element of explicit lessons. The third change that teacher candidates made was to connect the lesson to previous learning. In fact, many teacher candidates re-labeled the “introduction” as the “connect” section. In a post-assessment re-write, one teacher candidate’s lesson changed from this:

1) Explain that it’s important to line up correctly every day.

To this:

Boys and girls, I’ve noticed that when we line up at the door that it can get a bit crazy. So I would like to work with you on lining up today. We line up several different times in a day, so it’s important that we know how to do it quickly and quietly so we can get to where we need to be.

When we analyzed the difference between the two groups, the second group with the explicit focus on strategies for English language learners had made more substantial changes than the first group, who had primarily re-labeled their introduction. The other area of change happened in the section that teacher candidates had labeled the “conclusion.” On the pre-assessment many of the lessons did not have any sort of conclusion. When a conclusion was included, it consisted primarily of re-stating the expectation that students would line up properly. The teacher candidates’ post-course revisions included: adding a whole
section of the lesson for sharing, providing explicit feedback on how students employed the strategy, and asking students to reflect. For example, one candidate revised the section to include, “Let a couple students share tips to be a good line-up person (e.g., looking straight ahead, staying quiet, hands to yourself).” Few of the students in the first group made changes to the concluding section compared to the group with the added focus on supporting language learners. One commented that she made changes because “I feel I understand the flow now, not just the names of the sections.”

Finally, when we asked teacher candidates about their key take-aways related to mini-lessons the responses from the first group fell into three categories. The largest category was from teacher candidates who noted the usefulness of the mini-lesson. For example one stated, “It makes teaching a lot easier and is a good process for the student to learn and understand.” This group also had comments regarding the structure of mini-lessons and the importance of the “I do” or “Teach” section.

In the group with a larger focus on supporting language learners, the key idea about mini-lessons that they mentioned almost exclusively was that, “You stick to one teaching point or tip for the students.” A few responses also included some comment regarding explicitness, such as: “Mini-lessons need to be explicit so that students understand exactly what is expected.”

**Support for English Language Learners in the Mini-Lesson**

For both groups the pre-assessment indicated that pre-service teachers entered the course with a range of strategies that they felt would be supportive for English language learners. With the exception of six teacher candidates in the first group, everyone included some supports in their mini-lessons. The most common strategies were posting written steps, including icons or picture supports, and modeling or acting out. Other strategies included: teaching vocabulary
words, checking for understanding, peer help, additional wait time, explanations, and “standing close by language learners.”

There were few English language learner supports added in the post-assessment revisions to the mini-lessons for either group. Two teacher candidates in the first group revised their lessons for language supports. One added the inclusion of visuals and the other added that he or she would “emphasize actions” as a support. Five teacher candidates in the second group revised their mini-lessons to include additional supports. These supports included: written steps, visuals, peer support, and a chant of the expectations.

Interestingly, one teacher candidate from the first group did not write a mini-lesson. Instead, the response simply listed the steps that were to be followed. However, there was a side note stating: “For ELLs: Teacher demonstrates each step as it is done. Teacher then leads the class, then supervises individually in an I do, we do, you do release.” The idea the teacher candidate seems to be stating here is that most students simply need to be told what to do, whereas English language learners would benefit from modeling and a gradual release of responsibility structure (I do, we do, you do, you do on your own). In a sort of reversal of that idea, a teacher candidate from the group focused on supporting language learners noted next to her accommodation of a chart with steps and pictures that this would be “helpful for ALL!” Here the idea is that providing visual supports (both text and images) for English language learners would support every student. In fact, several teacher candidates in the second group echoed this idea, for example: “When you provide more visuals or scaffolding, the entire class benefits from the support,” and “Adding ways to support English language learners when writing a lesson plan or creating an activity can benefit the whole class, not just the students learning English.”

Realizing that the work of differentiating and adding supports for a particular group of learners
would have broad benefits for all was an “Aha!” idea for many of the teacher candidates in the second group. Good instruction for the masses is not necessarily enough for language learners, rather good instruction for language learners may benefit others!

**Discussion**

Adding a focus on language learners within a teacher education course does not have to be difficult and does not seem to require new courses, a finding that differs from Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gozalez’s (2008) recommendation that teacher education curriculum must add a separate course devoted to teaching ELLs. Perhaps the most reassuring piece of data for us is that our teacher candidates are now coming into our literacy course with some consciousness about the language learners they will inevitably teach and how they can support those learners, without a required separate course. Overall, the teacher candidates in both groups demonstrated understandings of strategies to shelter instruction for language learners. While we recognize that our students have much more to learn about supporting language learners in mainstream classrooms, they have a start. Perhaps, rather than adding a course, what is needed is to carefully examine all existing courses in teacher education and to modify those to intentionally focus on how to include and support language learners. We have started on that process and have a long road yet to travel.

We expected the second group, where we focused more explicitly on language learners and how mini-lessons can support language learners to demonstrate more changes to their understandings. This was not the case; both groups incorporated strategies into their pre- and post- mini-lessons. In retrospect, our choice of prompt may have skewed the results. In our attempt to make sure that the teacher candidates had the content knowledge so that they could focus on thinking about and demonstrating their understandings related to mini-lessons, we made
the prompt too simple. Our prompt begs for visual support and modeling, and almost all the students teacher candidates incorporated that type of support. We wonder what would happen if we had a prompt that required more cognitive load on the part of our teacher candidates, reducing the context support as Cummins (1994) describes for language learners. Perhaps a prompt focused on teaching a reading or writing strategy would have required the students to think more deeply and consider sheltering strategies beyond visuals and vocabulary that they had been introduced to via SIOP (Echevarria et al., 2008). At various times in the quarter our teacher candidates do plan reading and writing strategy lessons and have incorporated sheltering techniques. Close analysis of these lessons may provide us with additional information regarding teacher candidates’ preparedness for supporting language learners. A change in the prompt and further analysis of lessons developed during the course would be an appropriate next step for this research.

What was significantly different between the two groups, however, was their understanding of the mini-lesson. Teacher candidates in the second group, where we focused on the alignment between SIOP and mini-lessons, made more changes to the explicit mini-lessons in the end. They appeared to understand why being explicit was critical. We wondered if this was because of the focus on the specific needs of language learners or the specific focus on the explicit mini-lesson and the importance of that explicitness for language learners that the teacher candidates had read about (Riddle Buly, 2011). Did the teacher candidates in our second group understand why being explicit matters more because of the focus we had put on language learners? We were happily surprised, but we need to examine this more closely with future groups of teacher candidates.
A second surprising finding was that teacher candidates in both groups came in with more strategies than we expected for supporting language learners and therefore made fewer revisions at the end because they had started with some sheltering strategies in their initial pre-plans. Several years ago the feedback we received from our graduates was that they did not feel prepared to work with English language learners. The attention that has been paid to infusing understandings about language learners across the program appears to be resulting in teacher candidates with greater understandings. Perhaps our teacher candidates are retaining the information presented in earlier courses, or getting more out of their initial early introduction to SIOP and other references to language learners than they previously thought. Whatever the case, they appear to be more confident and competent in their preparation for working with language learners. We need to further investigate this phenomenon, especially delineating what they are learning and where they are learning it so that we can identify what else would be helpful in their instructional repertoire and understandings.

Our students are feeling better prepared to work with language learners. Have they learned all that they need to? Probably not, but they are on the road to understanding. They recognize that they need strategies to meet the needs of language learners. Perhaps most impressive is that many of our students recognized and voiced to us that good instruction for language learners can help all students. This is a complete turn from what we heard in the past, and what is often mistakenly promoted: good instruction is good instruction for everyone. That’s true, but good instruction for native or proficient English speakers is not the same as good instruction that considers the needs of language learners in the mix. In a recent review of research on what works for teaching English language learners, Goldenberg (2008) reports that good instruction for non-language learners does help English learners and, at the same time,
English learners require instructional accommodations to that good instruction. So there is some truth to the statement that what is good for native or proficient English speakers is probably good for language learners, but it’s not enough. “Instructional programs based on models that subscribe to the notion that students share the same cultural background, speak the same language, and have the same academic preparation are not meeting the needs of today’s students” (Genzuk, 2011).

Our teacher candidates now recognize that good differentiated instruction for language learners can help all students, and it’s not that hard to incorporate into their mainstream lessons. Good instruction for language learners includes sheltering techniques like those exemplified in the SIOP and in our framework for explicit mini-lessons. Most important is that adding to our pre-service teachers’ strategies and skills for supporting language learners has not been that difficult for our teacher preparation program. We have not had to add courses or time to our teacher education curriculum. What we have needed to do and to continue is to carefully consider what we are doing in the courses we have and how we can be more explicit with our teacher candidates about how they can support language learners in their future mainstream classrooms. We hope that in the future, as we continue to focus on language learners in our instruction, all our teacher candidates will share the sentiment written by one from our second group:

I appreciated the emphasis on how we can reach and better educate English language learners. I feel more prepared to work with students in the future now with a better understanding of strategies I can use.
References


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