



A SECOND SET *of* EYES *and* EARS

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL BOOSTS SKILLS FOR TEACHERS OF ELL STUDENTS

By Vicky Giouroukakis, Audrey Cohan, Jacqueline Nenchin, and Andrea Honigsfeld

In a large suburban school district with a growing English language learner (ELL) population, teachers were often heard asking the rhetorical question, “How do I help children who do not speak a word of English?” To create a solution, the district approached faculty at a nearby college seeking partners to provide professional development to teachers in grades 6 and 7 (for a total of six middle school teams) to help them address the needs of their ELL students. According to Zeichner, “While federal and state policies have placed increasing demands on teachers, professional development opportunities focusing on the education of ELLs have not kept pace” (as cited in Gebhard & Willett, 2008, p. 42).

THE NEED FOR PARTNERS

In the previous year, one member of the faculty presented in-depth workshops on content-based ELL strategies using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, also known as the SIOP model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008), to provide a comprehensive lesson planning and

delivery system. These workshops offered content and language support and enhanced ELLs’ academic and linguistic development. Although beneficial, the district wanted to take this professional development one step further and provide ongoing, classroom-based professional development to build on what the teachers learned.

After the initial workshops, the district recognized that there was a need for extended, classroom-based professional development with a team approach by faculty members with expertise in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) teacher preparation. Thus, the district partnered with a team of graduate education faculty at a neighboring college representing multiple content areas with diverse teaching backgrounds able to offer high-quality professional learning.

CLASSROOM-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The intent of the professional development was to equip content teachers with strategies and skills to help ELL students become successful. The external partners perceived their role as the teachers’ eyes and ears, to com-

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL

General feedback	Feedback specific to working with ELLs	Examples/comments
Clarity of lesson objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content objectives Language objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Form 	
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connections to ELLs' prior knowledge and experience or • Building background knowledge 	
Lesson delivery and sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lesson accessibility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the lesson follow a predictable sequence? • Are the ELLs able to follow along with the lesson? • Instructional scaffolding: teacher modeling, guided practice • Monitoring and ensuring student understanding 	
Reading activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading strategies for ELLs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prereading • During reading • Post-reading • Adapting text 	
Differentiation of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaffolded and tiered activities • Use of technology to promote content and language learning • Use of varied, appropriate, and motivational instructional aids 	
Student engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELL participation • Students' comfort level at asking for clarification 	
Questioning techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions matched to ELLs' language proficiency levels • Increased wait time • Eliciting responses from ELLs • Questions that require critical thinking 	
Teacher talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical props (gestures, pantomimes, graphics) • Simplified but not unnatural talk • Repetition and paraphrasing • Rate of speech 	
Cooperative learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings with a purpose • Use of pairing of speakers of the same language • Use of pairing of a native English speaker with an ELL 	
Assessment techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation of assessment for ELLs • Accommodations 	
Supplemental help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra help before or after school for ELLs • Mentoring of ELLs 	

Source: Based on Allen and LeBlanc's collaborative peer coaching model (2005).

municate with them about what was occurring in their classrooms that they did not necessarily notice, and to discuss how their observations could be used to better serve ELL students. Serving as the teachers' eyes and ears would prompt discussion and suggestions about how best to meet the challenges facing their diverse students.

By design, the professional development benefited not only ELLs, but also students with special needs and *all* learners in need of differentiated instruction. The external partners provided support and practical, meaningful suggestions for teachers to use in their classrooms. The professional development occurred in a risk-free environment in

which teachers felt comfortable voicing their concerns, needs, and frustrations. Teachers perceived the external partners as their advocates and gradually learned to trust them. This reflects the positive relationship between social trust and teaching success as described by Fisler and Firestone (2006).

This classroom-based professional development, highlighted in the research, provides content-specific feedback to individual teachers and involves working within their classrooms to make new ideas part of their daily routines. This model is often cited as most effective in terms of enacting instructional change

(Joyce & Calhoun, 1996; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Hirsh, 2009).

NEXT STEPS

The school will sustain the work of the partnership through these strategies:

1. Continuation of classroom-based professional development with follow-up.
2. More combined team meetings.
3. Potential for co-teaching.

During the initial visits, external partners held informal conversations with teachers about the broad picture of ELL instruction, acculturation, and linguistic needs in the district. They asked about teachers' perceived instructional

needs and then began regular classroom observations. As observers, external partners took notes on the physical environment, materials used, lesson delivery, student response, and other factors, pointing out positive elements as well as making general suggestions for improving ELL instruction. Teachers felt challenged, possibly because they felt that they lacked skills, knowledge, or training to meet these students' needs, especially beginner ELL students, while also meeting the needs of the rest of the class.

THE NEED FOR A CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL

The external partners needed a common classroom observation tool to standardize teacher feedback. They agreed that a common language was necessary to communicate with the administration and teams. A common language would also allow teachers to collaborate with each other after the professional development ended. Teams consisted of content teachers, teaching assistants, ELL teachers, and sometimes the inclusion teachers.

The external partners adapted a classroom observation tool that was based on second language acquisition theory, research-based instructional practices for ELLs, Allen and LeBlanc's (2005) collaborative peer coaching model, and Honigsfeld and Dove's (2010) work on general education and ELL teacher collaboration. This protocol is in chart form (p. 61).

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL AND TEAM MEETINGS

The most important structure for this professional development — team meetings in which the classroom observation tool could be shared and discussed with teachers — had al-

ready been in place in the middle school. Designated periods allowed external partners to meet with teachers in a group each day and discuss pedagogical concerns about lesson planning, instructional delivery, and ELL assessment. These discussions were critical and allowed teams to share best practices as well as their challenges and how they overcame them.

External partners used teachers' successful strategies to springboard into specific suggestions about ways to further improve instruction, not just for the ELLs, but for all learners. They noted that teachers responded well to hearing about each other's successes, and this created a positive and supportive learning environment. Additionally, they believed that when teachers realized that this was a no-risk experience, they began to generate questions and share concerns about their ELL students' linguistic needs, while reflecting on their own practices.

After working with teachers during team meetings, external partners were impressed by the value of this shared period and noticed three strengths of this powerful use of time in the middle school. This common work period:

- Values teachers and their efforts to improve instruction;
- Fosters the sharing of concerns about individual students who are at risk of academic failure or may need to be further engaged or challenged; and
- Allows teachers to share content knowledge and pedagogical expertise.

Team meetings consisted of rich discussions about issues that teachers face when teaching ELLs and finding ways to address those issues. Topics included cultural and linguistic differences, differentiation of instruction, adaptations, research findings on best practices for ELLs, language-sensitive content instruction, and teaching suggestions for the individual content areas of math, science, English, and social studies.

BENEFITS OF THE EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP

The professional development yielded several positive results, including:

- Raising teachers' cultural awareness and consciousness. Teachers demonstrated cultural sensitivity gained through the learning. They became more aware of the cultural needs and differences of ELL students and tried to involve these students in lessons. They asked for input from ELLs, learned about ELLs' culture, family history, and home life, and grouped them with non-native as well as native speakers for classroom work;
- Encouraging teachers to reflect on their individual practice, especially as it concerned ELLs, and how to improve instruction to be more culturally and linguistically responsive while also academically challenging; and
- Increasing teachers' awareness of strategic instruction by enhancing the use of strategies that they had been using all along as well as by implementing new effective strategies for ELLs.

The extent to which implementation took place varied. However, teachers implemented specific changes, including:

- Cooperative learning techniques, such as jigsaw and partner work;
- More visuals and graphic organizers that present content in a more accessible way;
- Additional materials, such as bilingual glossaries, dictionaries, and textbooks;
- Modifications in the presentation of materials;
- Written scaffolding, including sentence starters, cloze exercises, word banks, essay templates, mentor texts;
- Practice assessments in students' native languages;
- More simplified oral and written language; and
- Structured, scaffolded explanations of directions or assignments.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on formal and informal conversations with all constituents and ongoing observations, findings suggest the professional development resulted in both broad and discrete changes to enhance teaching and learning for ELLs.

1. External partners found that a level of differentiation was needed for teacher learning as well as student learning. Bowgren and Sever (2010) recognize that teachers are learners as well and that a “district’s staff can be as diversified as any classroom of students” (p. 44). With that in mind, they considered the differentiation of teacher learning as they met with teachers individually and referred to the notes recorded on the classroom observation tool. These one-on-one meetings offered the opportunity to give specific feedback regarding instructional planning and effective implementation of lessons.
2. Modified textbooks and materials as well as multicultural resources will enhance the content learning of ELLs. For example, grade-level textbooks are available by the same publisher in a simplified version at a lower reading level, which is more linguistically accessible to ELLs and to students with special needs while presenting the same content. Web sites about teaching ELLs, such as www.culturegrams.com, and other pertinent materials should be an integral part of every teacher’s multicultural tool kit.

COMMITMENT TO GROWTH

Educational researchers acknowledge that the quality of schools’ professional development helps to explain the commitment to or lack of responsibility for the success of English language learners. Furthermore, middle schools that have sustained, coherent, ELL-focused professional development provide opportunities for growth to all teachers and administrators (Walqui et al., 2010). Classroom-based professional development allows teachers to learn in context, which is the most effective learning because it is specific — customized to

the situation — as well as social — involves the group (Fullan, 2001). The strong model of success exemplified by the college-school partnership described above — including the classroom-based professional development and the classroom observation tool — has the potential to assist middle school teachers as they work toward positive academic achievement of English language learners.

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- Vicky Giouroukakis (vgiouroukakis@molloy.edu) is associate professor, Audrey Cohan (acohan@molloy.edu) is professor, Jacqueline Nenchin (jnenchin@molloy.edu) is assistant professor, and Andrea Honigsfeld (ahonigsfeld@molloy.edu) is professor at Molloy College in Rockville Centre, N.Y. ■