

Academic Afterschool Support for English Language Learners in Middle School through a Literacy Methods Course: A Summary of Five Years of Experiences

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English language learners (ELs) present the fastest growing school population in the southeastern region. Therefore teachers need to be specifically prepared to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate support to ELs using research-evidenced practices. For this purpose, a southeastern university integrated an afterschool academic EL support program into a graduate literacy course to serve ELs at a middle school. This paper shares the course characteristics, the afterschool support model, selected case scenarios with intervention content, and mixed methods impact data from various sources. Based on described benefits and challenges, suggestions for other institutions of learning are provided.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the number of nonnative speakers of English or English language learners (ELs) have continued to increase significantly nationwide (Whelan, et al., 2018). This has led to a chronic shortage of properly trained classroom and ESOL teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and causes frequent inadequate or lacking learner support for ELs (Hoover, et al., 2016) that is mandated by federal law (Whelan et al., 2018). Currently, the southeastern state in which the to be described academic EL afterschool support services took place, is nationwide the state with the highest increase in ELs (827.8%) (Ruiz Soto, et al., 2015a). The majority of ELs (81%) are Spanish speaking followed by Russian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Arabic (Ruiz Soto, et al., 2015b).

In an attempt to address this educational challenge, the College of Education at a midsize southeastern U.S. college integrated specific EL-focused fieldwork into two early courses in the graduate literacy program that can lead to literacy coach certification. These courses are

approved for ESOL add-on certification by the state. The first course is a prerequisite for the second course and introduces licensed teachers to the basic characteristics, needs and realities of ELs and their families, the laws that protect ELs, the learning theories behind culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction and assessment, as well as challenges of English in the areas of phonics, syntax, and vocabulary. The second course engages candidates in university professor-supervised clinical practice with ELs during graduate course time in an afterschool program at a nearby middle school.

To invite other colleges to replicate variations of such a field-based course with an afterschool support program (ASSP) for ELs and to encourage public schools to offer EL-focused ASSPs, the author first describes the design and content of the graduate course along with the ASSP model. Then, based on five years of ASSP data collected by the course instructor (CI), background information is shared on participating ELs and graduate students teaching lessons, referred to as interventionists. Next, selected case scenarios illustrate the diversity of ELs served along with research-evidenced

intervention content. Lastly, a summary of benefits and challenges of the ASSP are shared based on CI field notes, oral and written feedback from course participants, ESOL teachers, and ASSP helpers, as well as course participants' lesson plans, reflections, and assessment reports. Thus, this small mixed methods study shares the impact of an eight-week ASSP on ELs and their graduate and undergraduate ASSP participants.

ASSP Course Design and Clinic-Based Assignments

While graduate students gained practice in research-evidenced assessments of EL needs in the first course, the second course allowed them to repeat this practice and gain additional supervised experience with EL-specific, research-evidenced intervention practices that focused on scaffolded, multisensory structured, metacognitive language (MSML) instruction (August & Shanahan, 2007; Birsh & Carraker, 2018; Hoover, et al., 2016) and sheltered instructional observational protocol (SIOP) instruction (Echevarria, et al., 2017). Both approaches aim at making language dynamics explicit to the learner, and provide ample repetitive, multisensory, linguistically and culturally appropriate, carefully structured learning opportunities. Interventionists also implemented a variety of EL-appropriate assessment procedures, including dynamic assessments in which assessors function as facilitators of learning and document learner success and needs to inform subsequent instructional steps and lessons (Whelan, et. al., 2018). Areas of instruction included oral language practice, vocabulary expansion, reading and spelling strategies, listening and reading comprehension as well as writing instruction with explicit practice of sentence structures commonly used in middle school expository writing tasks (i.e., summaries, reports). Such content was taught based on identified

learner skills and needs in six one-on one or small group intervention lessons, referred to as an intervention cycle. ELs worked with either one or two interventionists, who then co-taught. Interventionists kept specific notes on learner performance, and linguistic and cultural learning needs to be reported in lesson reflections.

At the school site, course participants provided intervention during regular course time (5:00-6:00pm). In the first session, they got to know ELs' academic and social strengths, likes and challenges through a self-designed ice-breaker activity that was based on brief language skills and needs data from the ESOL teacher. Then they assessed their phonics, reading and spelling skills using phonics cards and other materials. Based on this 30-40 minute assessment and the gained background information, course participants planned six MSML/SIOP-based lessons with specific content and language objectives, explicit descriptions of vocabulary pre-teaching and dynamic post-lesson assessment practices (Birsh & Carraker, 2018; Echevarria, et al., 2017). The last session was reserved for the post-assessment.

The CI provided pre-lesson, during-lesson and post-lesson oral and written feedback on lesson content and delivery as needed. Written lessons were submitted weekly for feedback prior to being taught. At the end of the course, these were evaluated for a final grade when students submitted revised versions of lesson plans along with lesson reflections. Pre-and post intervention assessment reports with reflections were also submitted for feedback and revisions. This approach modeled teaching towards mastery through revision and repeated practice of tasks, an essential component of effective EL instruction (August & Shanahan, 2007).

All reflections contained prompts to elicit culturally and linguistically based challenges of interventionists and ELs to foster realizations about better culturally and

linguistically responsive instruction and assessment (Whelan et al., 2018). Such thinking was also fostered through readings and discussions of intervention experiences, subsequent lesson ideas with the CI and peers immediately after each 55-minute lesson. Then the CI shared observations and highlighted areas of strength and improvement.

The post assessment content contained only what had been taught and was carefully discussed with the CI and peers to practice the design of EL-appropriate assessments (August & Shanahan, 2007; Hoover, et al., 2018). The final intervention report described specifically how ELs had performed related to each assessed lesson objective and gave recommendations for future interventions. This report was shared with the ESOL teacher/s at the school so targeted learning support could continue. As appropriate, ESOL teachers also shared these results with other teachers at the school. After the eight sessions, the CI sponsored a pizza party for ELs at the school to celebrate their accomplishments. ELs received a formal certificate of attendance and other academically supportive gifts from their interventionists.

After School Program (ASSP) Structure

The described graduate course-related interventions took place every spring between 5:00-6:00 p.m. for eight weeks at a rural middle school that, according ESOL teacher information, annually served 120-140 ELs during the reported five-year period. For the after school supervision and language/homework support of ELs prior to these lessons (3:45-5:00 pm), the CI recruited yearly one graduate student with a state licensure and 3-4 undergraduates who either were Teaching Fellows in need of completing EL service hours for their scholarship or social work majors who sought experiences with ELs. Two helpers always stayed on to

observe the graduate students teach and then to supervise the pick-up by parents/guardians between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m. After 6:15 p.m., graduate class continued at the school until 8:00 p.m. It always started with the debriefing of just occurred assessment/intervention experiences.

Prior to starting the ASSP in the fourth week of the semester, the CI delivered food and beverages for ELs and ASSP helpers to the school and trained selected ASSP helpers on how to provide explicit, research-evidenced homework and vocabulary learning support. The CI also brought research-evidenced learning games to the school for helpers to use during the supervised homework support that often focused onat engaging ELs in oral language practice, an area of need identified by ESOL teachers. While graduate students were teaching, the CI continued to guide ASSP helpers in their realizations about best practices with ELs by answering questions, pointing out evidence of such examples and fostering critical thinking for transfer of those strategies in different content areas and disciplines (i.e., music, art, social studies, mathematics).

To recruit ELs, the CI collaborated with the ESOL teacher/s at the school. They sent district-approved invitation letter in English and Spanish to parents/guardians of ELs who they thought had the most need and would have means to get home after the ASSP. Only those ELs with signed permission slips could participate in the ASSP.

Background information on ASSP participants and interventionists

During the five-year period, overall 40 ELs (20 females and 20 males) were served via a total of 228 MSML/SIOP lessons. All but three ELs spoke Spanish as their first language (92.5%). One EL spoke Vietnamese, one French, and one three Indian languages at home. The majority, 26

ELs (65%), were newcomers within their first year in a U.S. school. Of those eleven newcomers (42.3%) had not even been in the U.S. for more than six months and 15 (57.7%) had been in the U.S. between 6-12 months. One of them had not had any prior schooling before coming to the U.S. Additionally, eleven ELs (27.5%) were in their second year and five (12.5%) were in their third year in U.S. schools. Four ELs (10%) were classified with a disability (learning disability, speech impairment).

These ELs were assessed and taught by a total of 50 interventionists (49 females). All interventionists were state licensed teachers completing a Masters in Literacy degree. At the start of each intervention cycle, almost every interventionist expressed worries about not being able to communicate with ELs properly. The majority, 76% (N= 38), were Early Childhood and Elementary school teachers who routinely expressed their concerns about working with middle school students. Four of them had entered the graduate program right after completing their undergraduate program. These were paired with middle and high school teachers when possible for support and to broaden their experiences for the K-12 literacy coach certification. Five interventionists (10%) were middle school teachers and three (6%) were high school teachers. For three years, co-teaching of lessons occurred for each individual EL. For one year, interventions occurred one-on-one. For another year, to meet EL needs, some ELs received one-on-one interventions and others were paired up based on similar learning needs to be taught by one interventionist.

Case Scenarios

The following selective scenarios provide examples of the diversity of ELs and how their needs were met. Pseudo names along with only basic background information is shared to protect the identity of ELs. The

review of 228 MSML/SIOP lesson plans revealed that all lessons (100%) included explicit, repetitive Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 vocabulary instruction (Beck, et al., 2013). For newcomers who had never been in the ASSP before, three quarters of lessons addressed phonics topics such as how and why single vowels are pronounced differently in different positions in words, names and sounds of alphabet letters, multiple sounds and spellings of letter-sound patterns, particularly vowel teams (i.e., *soon*, *please*) as they are not a known feature in Spanish. These concepts were practiced in gradually increasing reading and spelling tasks. When ELs were ready for multisyllabic words (towards second half of first intervention cycle for some newcomers), reading rules were taught such as where to break words with even or uneven numbers of consonants in between vowels (i.e. *bas.ket*, *ra.ven* vs. *rap.ids*), or how to read words with prefix, root, suffix patterns (i.e. *re.take*, *con.struct.ive*). For such word patterns, ELs practiced repeatedly what these word parts meant, and how to pronounce, spell and use words with such patterns in sentences. After ELs were able to read multisyllabic words, essential spelling rules crucial for middle school writing tasks were tackled. They taught ELs how to ensure proper spelling when adding suffixes such as the “Change Y to I Rule” (*complying* vs. *complied*) and the “Doubling consonants” Rule (*plans* vs. *planning*). Additionally, text composition strategies along with sentence writing practices were included mostly with ELs in their second or third intervention cycle.

Case Scenario 1: Beto

From sixth through eighth grade, Beto whose first language was Spanish, spent three intervention cycles in the ASSP, receiving 18 lessons. He started out as a newcomer to the school six months prior to joining the ASSP. Initially, he would slam his head on the table,

breathing heavily and suppressing tears whenever he made even the slightest mistake. It took many carefully crafted, middle school-appropriate activities that included his love for soccer to help him overcome his frustration with English. Large-motor ball games to elicit oral language practice, gestures for difficult sounds, especially vowels, and a variety of board games that allowed for playful repetitive practice of speaking, reading and writing tasks were some examples of MSML intervention practices. After the first four weeks, Beto started to show increasing confidence. He progressed quickly into an eager, successful EL who enjoyed applying new language strategies when he realized that he could make sense of the messy English pronunciation and spelling system. The first intervention cycle focused on essential phonics components including decoding multisyllabic words that contained phonics patterns he had learned. To understand the basics of English sentence structures (coordinate sentences with *and*, *but* or conjunctions), Beto also practiced making sentences with color-coded strips that represented sentence functions (predicate, subject, direct/indirect object and time or place information). He read and wrote those structures repeatedly. In the second intervention cycle, he demonstrated that he had retained all the phonics and syntax rules he had been taught a year before and was ready to learn spelling and reading strategies (i.e., how to check words for four spelling rules, how to divide new multisyllabic words according to four techniques). In the last intervention cycle in 8th grade, Beto learned more advanced reading and comprehension strategies as well as a MSML text composition approach that used color-coding to help organize thoughts and sentence frames characteristic for specific expository report writing. All strategies engaged Beto in metacognitive ‘think alouds’ and language

self-check tricks to boost his self-esteem and confidence in English. Vocabulary enhancement was a key factor in each session through all intervention cycles. It started with image support and picture coded memory games for essential Tier 1 and Tier 2 vocabulary and progressed to prefix-root-suffix vocabulary learning with gestures, images and board games. Beto repeated all new vocabulary orally at least ten times during a session before being asked to use it in brief writing tasks. Beto was so eager to learn that he asked for homework activities and even elected not to be on the soccer team. During the last pizza party, he did not want to eat. Instead, he asked to be taught more strategies before heading on to high school. Beto represents a type of EL that expresses learning frustrations but resiliently continues to motivate himself and can absorb explicitly presented content with learning strategies mostly within one session.

Case Scenario 2: Jose

Jose was a Spanish-speaking newcomer with only two months in the U.S. school system. He remained in the ASSP for two intervention cycles, receiving 12 lessons. Jose was diagnosed with speech impairments and also struggled significantly with retaining taught information. He had a joyful personality and engaged willingly in the explicit multisensory mouth movement and hand gesture strategies used to help with his articulation issues. Jose also responded well to picture cues and repeated use of new Tier 1 vocabulary in brief phrases or sentences that contained essential sounds taught (predominantly vowel teams such as *ee*, *oo*, *ai*, and single short vowels /a/ and /i/ in common words such as *plas.tic* or *win.ter*). With Jose, each topic had to be repeated at least 4-5 times before signs of having reached the long-term memory occurred. This made us wonder about the not yet researched impact of traumatic migration or home experiences of ELs on their ability to learn or

whether other unidentified learning disabilities were the cause of such laborious learning. Jose exemplifies an EL with language acquisition and disability challenges that require special attention.

Case Scenario 3: Marisol

Marisol was a Spanish-speaking newcomer in her first three months in the U.S. As an 8th grader, she could complete one intervention cycle with six lessons. Contrary to usually shy and withdrawn newcomers who were embarrassed to practice speaking English, Marisol was an inquisitive ‘sponge.’ She used translation tools on her phone every few minutes to ask questions or to find words she wanted to use to make herself understood. During homework support time, she sought specific help for math tasks and social studies tests instead of opting to play language games. Marisol could handle several distinctly different topics per lesson. She learned to read and spell single and multisyllabic words in context with different single vowel and vowel team patterns (i.e., *re.peat*), consonants with multiple pronunciations (letters g and c in words such as *goat/gender* and *cat/ cycle*), and multiple spellings of sounds such as long A-sound in *ta.ble, came, maintain, and stay*. Additionally, Marisol made her own connections between English and Spanish and shared them eagerly when she discovered that the two sounds for letter C also exist in Spanish. Each lesson also included Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 vocabulary words including two common prefixes, roots or suffixes. She learned their meanings via gestures and images, and practiced their pronunciation, and spelling through repetitive practice using board games. Contextualized reading passages and brief writing tasks that addressed her personal interests allowed her to connect learned concepts to middle school related tasks. This learner profile represents an example of an

immediately independent learner who was able to retain multiple concepts per lesson along with shared MSML learning strategies.

Lessons Learned

Overall, the positive impact of the described ASSP is evident. Benefits for interventionists, the ASSP helpers, Teaching Fellows Directors, ESOL teachers, and the CI are summarized as follows:

Based on oral feedback during after-intervention briefings, written lesson and assessment reflections as well as end-of course feedback on the supervised clinical experience with ELs, benefits for participating graduate students included *“losing the fear of working with ELs because I learned they like to learn like any other student,”* gaining explicit, immediate feedback during and after intervention lessons and hearing what other peers experienced differently or similarly. Main realizations included that *“ELs can learn really fast and sustain information”* when careful attention is given to explicit, repeated vocabulary and sentence structure support and that ELs can display deficits in phonics skills, reading and writing like elementary students that can be addressed in ways appropriate for middle school. They saw ELs’ receptiveness to learning and ability to retain information as clearly different from intervention experiences they gathered in another course during the same semester with students with learning disabilities who often need more than four repeated lessons on a concept. This realization confirmed discussed research (Hoover, et al., 2016). Over a five-year period, the EL-focused ASSP at the middle school was perceived as a highly valued learning experience in the course. Course participants repeatedly expressed this in comments such as *“This clinic experience showed me that I can make a difference with struggling learners of all ages, especially ELs.”* Others pointed out:

“Before this experience I had no idea that middle school ELs could benefit so much from explicit multisensory language instruction and “Realizing how much not knowing pronunciation and spelling strategies can keep ELs from succeeding has made me a better teacher.” Another stated: “The clinic was by far the most valuable experience. The personal contact and teaching opportunities with ELs have helped me understand their needs so much better. I now can help them and other struggling students in my classroom with the strategies I learned.”

Based on oral and written feedback from undergraduate ASSP helpers (Teaching Fellows) and feedback from two different Teaching Fellows program directors, benefits for undergraduate ASSP helpers included being able to efficiently teach ELs and identify their needs in different subjects after the mentoring they received from the CI. Some helpers indicated during EL support sessions that they did not realize how much vocabulary support it took for ELs to really understand what was expected of them for homework assignments or test preparations even when study guides are provided. One student is eager to pursue a Master’s in TESOL after this experience and another switched her major to Special Education because she realized how meaningful it was to her to help struggling learners. Both Teaching Fellows directors shared that those students who participated in the ASSP displayed significantly stronger EL intervention skills in their final program internships and were able to articulate EL support needs more explicitly in reflections than non-participating peers. A social work major who was fluent in Spanish and supported an eighth grader with no prior schooling, expressed that she was shocked how hard it was for ELs to remain positive about learning math or science content when they felt *“in the shoes of a two-year-old in*

middle school.” She admired *“ELs’ incredible tenacity.”*

All four collaborating ESOL teachers praised the positive impact the personalized ASSP was having on participating ELs. They were deeply grateful for the provided research-evidenced learning support, especially the phonics components, as they just did not have the time to help ELs understand the dynamics of English with these practices. They stressed that participating ELs were thankful for the ASSP. One ESOL teacher shared: *“They [ELs] like coming because they feel valued even after a whole day of WIDA testing.”* ESOL teachers also saw ELs apply learned reading and spelling strategies in content area assignments. Independently, ESOL teachers reported that the annual WIDA language skills scores of ELs in the ASSP were rising faster than those of nonparticipating ELs. One ESOL teacher also pointed out that some ELs in the ASSP felt inspired to go to college some day after engaging with college students through the ASSP.

Lastly, the ASSP coordinator/CI noticed the consistently positive impact a short eight-week EL intervention program with six lessons was having on ELs. The analysis of 40 post assessment intervention reports revealed that 80 percent of ELs met each of the post assessment goals that were explicitly aligned with each learning objective of each taught lesson. Four ELs (10%) needed more instruction in complex, last taught content (advanced spelling rule, colored-writing strategy). Another four ELs did not meet every post assessment goal in spite of 4-5 repetitions in lessons due to classified learning disabilities. Overall, the presented benefits indicate a positive learning impact of the ASSP on ELs and other participants.

Challenges

The recruitment of ELs represented one challenge. More ELs would have participated in the ASSP had free afterschool

transportation been available for them. Legally, neither college students, local volunteers, the CI, nor teachers from the school could provide such transportation. For the two years the school had an after school learning support grant that included bus transportation, numbers of participating ELs averaged eleven students in contrast to 4-8 students in the other years.

The recruitment of a state-licensed graduate student who had to be in the same room with the undergraduate ASSP helpers while the CI supervised other helpers in another room was at times another challenge because these graduate students needed to be able to count these hours as assistantship hours. However, one student was so determined to work with ELs as a future school counselor, she provided her support two years in a row without compensation.

Conclusion

Based on the following additional suggestions, the presented ASSP example may serve as an incentive for institutions of higher education and public education programs to explore the implementation of EL-targeted afterschool support services. This may be of special interest to states that are required to display EL performance data on report cards. The described ASSP also offers ideas to strengthen partnerships between universities and public schools.

Financial local business support and/or a school grant could help fund afterschool transportation. Transportation issues could also be solved if ASSP services during late afternoon/early evening hours could be provided at the churches EL families attend. Some may have small church busses available for transportation. Field-based college courses or special high school club projects that aim at EL community support could be held there as well so that entire families could receive language training

while having child care available at the site. College course instructors could provide training sessions for college-credit courses. ESOL teachers and/or college faculty could offer training for research-evidenced language instruction for public school-based helpers and voluntary community helpers at such a commonly reachable site. If in-person training cannot be arranged, strategies could be provided via video recordings.

Ways to recruit ASSP helpers could include providing cultural credits for college students or special social service credits for middle or high school students. Additionally, ASSP services for ELs can also be integrated into undergraduate methods courses connected with existing after school programs in which EL could receive research-evidenced ASSP services.

In light of the current virus pandemic that temporarily has altered all educational services, ASSPs for ELs might be possible with individual tutors/interventionists through virtual lessons. However, this is only an option for EL families that have appropriate virtual resources available. Therefore, securing donations of electronic devices and WIFI services for ELs' homes are crucial. Via synchronous or asynchronous video recordings, training for tutors/interventionists would need to be provided by educators who have expertise in this area.

Too often, ELs' needs are not properly identified or addressed with EL-appropriate Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) (Hoover, et al., 2016). An ASSP that applies research-evidenced interventions can provide much needed effective support as described in this paper.

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