

# **Beyond One-size-fits-all ELD Frameworks: Bringing English Learner's Lives and Social Justice to the Center of K-12 Instruction**

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Four years ago, I began collaboration and research at an elementary school that had a high percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs), primarily from Spanish-speaking heritage, where teachers were in the early stages of exploring uses of English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards for English Language Development (ELD) (Oregon Department of Education, 2006). The teachers relied mostly on pull-out ELD instruction conducted by an ELL specialist in addition to Spanish/English dual language instruction by the classroom teachers. At the time, I wondered whether the teachers had considered a different model to integrate ELD to provide a connected and coherent program for the students. I asked whether they were inclined to explore English forms and functions within the functional contexts of the subject areas, such as science or social studies, which is important to the development of academic language with ELLs (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004).

During the 2008-09 year, two third-grade teachers and the ELL specialist agreed to work with me around questions of weaving together ELD and content using science and social studies as two academic contexts through which to teach English forms and functions. It quickly became clear that we also needed to attend to the social realities of our students, especially Latinos, because they brought many social and cultural experiences to bear on learning. In social studies, which is the focus of this article, topics such as immigration, culture, and social activism

seemed like a natural fit not only for particular English functions (e.g., generalizing) and forms (e.g., modifying adjectives) but also for discussing the social realities of being an ethnic minority and non-dominant language group. In the part of the study reported here, questions considered included: (1) How did a teacher-researcher team plan lessons that moved beyond ELD and content to include social justice? (2) How did a teacher navigate the “messiness” of socially-relevant instruction with multiple objectives?

## **Beyond generic instruction**

For teachers, it is critical to attend to the social realities and lives of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in addition to the prescribed curriculum and instruction. Bartolomé (2003) describes the misguided urgency of educators to seek “easy answers in the form of specific instructional methods” and “solutions... technical in nature (e.g., specific teaching methods, instructional curricula and materials)” that will help linguistic and cultural minority students catch up and narrow the achievement gap (p. 409). These types of methods are often generic in nature and intended to work with a variety of populations regardless of their cultural and linguistic diversity. Little attention is paid to how instruction for any group of students should be shaped and individualized to meet the social context and needs of particular students. Yet Hawley and Nieto (2010) argue that race and ethnicity matter and affect how students re-

respond to instruction and curriculum. Students have their own understandings of discrimination and differing approaches to learning opportunities in their lives. “Being more conscious of race and ethnicity is not discriminatory; it’s realistic” (Hawley and Nieto, 2010, p. 66). Bias and discrimination are a real part of life for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Along these lines, Mize and Dantas-Whitney (2007) claim, “Teachers should tailor instruction according to... the local context of the school, the student’s family, and the community” (p.

19). However, they report that there is a tendency to teach ELD in decontextualized and disconnected ways in the current systematic

ELD framework (Dutro, 2005). Mize and Dantas-Whitney describe two pitfalls in ELD instruction: (1) teachers are encouraged to use a grammatical matrix as a guide for ELD instruction and to check off English forms when covered in a list-like and limited manner, and (2) the Dutro (2005) framework for explicit and systematic ELD instruction (i.e., based on English grammatical forms and functions) provides example lesson plans that are reductionist and behaviorist in nature. Instead, the authors argue that ELD should be integrated with meaningful subject area topics to contribute to grade-level content learning and overall cognitive development. Furthermore, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) suggest that educators must look beyond academic-based knowledge to include “the lived experiences and perspectives that marginalized groups bring to bear on an issue” (p. 4); otherwise, students may only gain partial or limited knowledge about topics. Bartolomé (2003) calls for “a shift from a narrow and mechanistic view of instruction

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to one that is broader in scope and takes into consideration the sociohistorical and political dimensions of education” (p. 411).

## **Observing and collaborating**

During 2008-09, I collaborated with two teachers, Kim May and Tish Derko, (all names are pseudonyms) and an ELL specialist, Helena Beck, at an elementary school in the Pacific Northwest for the purposes of exploring new models of ELD instruction and connecting ELP standards to content and student lives. The study consisted of two parts: (1) after school collaborative meetings with

teachers and the specialist, and (2) in-class observations during ELD, social studies, and science. I digitally audio-recorded each meeting and class session, took

field notes, and collected curricular and student artifacts. Additionally, I gathered standardized test scores (e.g., IPT, ELPA) and conducted pre-/post-unit assessments based on content and language objectives for the science and social studies units.

Ms. May’s dual language third grade class had 42% Spanish-speaking ELLs (14 of 33 students), representing various English proficiency levels. Ms. Derko’s regular education 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class of 13 students had three ELLs from different countries (e.g., Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico). For the purposes of this article, the primary focus is on the dual language class because of the higher percentage of ELLs and need for extensive ELD. Kim May was a recent graduate of a university Immersion MAT program, focusing on cultural and linguistic immersion in diverse schools and teaching for social justice. I was a faculty member in the university program and previously had Ms. May enrolled in my courses. Ms. Beck had a Masters

degree in Applied Linguistics and robust training in ELP standards and ELD instruction.

The portion of the study reported on here includes transcripts of digitally recorded collaborative meetings and in-class discussions. I analyzed transcripts of teacher meetings and classroom conversations using discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) to describe: (1) how each adult participant contributed to planning for a layered approach to ELD integrating content and social justice and (2) how students interacted with the teacher in class showing relationships between social realities and ELD. Discourse analysis of collaborative meetings involved close study of how expertise and authority played out in conversations and how knowledge and plans were socially constructed to allow for a flow of ideas over time and context. For example, as a researcher with a focus on social justice, I restated and resurfaced ideas that the ELL specialist had discussed months earlier with me because they involved aspects of social justice. Discourse analysis of classroom conversations focused on how specific words revealed information about students' positioning (i.e., "they" or "us") and how turn-taking between students and teacher showed power dynamics (i.e., Ms. May limited a student's contribution by correcting his grammar usage). Discourse analysis of both data sources demonstrated the complexity of teacher collaboration and class conversation when multiple priorities are at stake.

### Themes revealed in the transcripts

In a planning meeting, the teachers, specialist, and I discussed the target English function and forms in the district's ELD pacing guide (i.e., generalizing and modifying adjectives, discussed in the example below) and the focal social studies topics of culture, immigration, and activism. With an eye towards broad and inclusive pedagogy, we

delved deeply into connections between generalizing, quantifiers, culture and immigration, and the students' own lives. We were not satisfied to take a "one size fits all" approach to teaching adjectives and sought ways to personalize instruction to fit students' social and cultural realities. In this excerpt, I had remembered the specialist Helena's earlier account about playground troubles in which Latino students faced negative stereotypes about Mexicans. It seemed that the English function *generalizing* was similar to the idea of stereotyping. By exploring this similarity, lessons could center on a "big question" that was personal to the students and potentially lead to an enhanced sense of social justice. Ms. Beck talked about an activity on quantifiers that served as a springboard for our discussion, as depicted below.

MS. BECK: I was using quantifiers and taking a statement that's a general statement and correctly quantifying it. So they had all these statements like, "baseballs are white." And one of them was, "Poor people are lazy." And then they had to check off that they thought that you should add *some, few, all, almost all*, whatever. So they have to figure out ... how they could role-play for the activism, how they could role-play polite ways of correcting somebody. So if your friend says, "Girls are stupid", what could you say? "Well maybe not all girls, my sister is pretty smart." So maybe it'd be better to say, "Some girls are stupid".

KATHRYN: It includes the ...quantifiers, the specific words, those are forms of language. So pairing that up, but then the social activism part, and it's tied to the immigration because the issue you talked about on the playground where they're saying, "Mexicans are lazy." But then the social activism

piece because you can help kids learn socially how to appropriately respond to that. Is it really that a lot of Mexicans are lazy or maybe we created a stereotype out of that? You know, weaving those all in together. Or you could even talk about the media. There are a few Mexicans who are in gangs and those are the ones that we see over and over again on TV so then we develop these stereotypes. Does that actually mean that a lot of Mexicans are in gangs? That sort of weaving together.... Using these quantifiers so that you're building the language; it's generalizing....

MS. BECK: You would probably be explicit. I think that's the piece that usually gets left out is explicitly saying, "This is how we say this..." But once you do that and you have it somewhere, where language learners can look up at, and the activity....

KATHRYN: I think that's a great fit with this chapter. Because you could go through this [text] and they used the words *most*, *many* in "Almost every culture has a traditional dance, almost every..." I mean I was noticing, if you look at the language that's naturally there, it's just..."Many Americans like to eat food."

The lesson was anything but generic, as it drew upon the harsh reality of stereotypes and the damage that comes from negative unsubstantiated generalizations made about groups. Yet, it also addressed content and ELP standards through multiple objectives. Through a focus on student social realities and natural uses of language (in addition to explicit teaching about language), we questioned how the ELD framework would fit and how concepts meshed together, hoping to make lessons deeply personal and motivating for learners. As a team, we followed

a layered integrated approach that focused on multi-stranded relationships among social experiences, content, and English forms and functions.

When this unit was implemented, in class, Ms. May experienced the complexity and tensions that arose from this multi-layered approach to teaching. She juggled ELD objectives and social justice goals within a larger class conversation, having to navigate back and forth across priorities. She modeled and suggested accurate uses of quantifying adjectives and helped students negotiate generalizations about groups. In the excerpt below, Ms. May cautioned Angelo about use of the word "none" and probed Maria's generalization about American diet.

MS. MAY: Let's pretend I come from Jupiter.... We have our own culture there. But I want to know about American culture in the United States. Use *none*, *few*....

MS. MAY: Most Americans eat pizza. Few Americans eat eyeballs.

ANGELO: None Americans eat...

MS. MAY: Be careful. None Americans are... Does that sound right? You could say "No Americans..." or you could say "None of the Americans..."

BRIANA: Most Americans eat pizza, drink soda, and watch TV.

MARIA: Most people eat fattening food and sit and ....

MS. MAY: Many Americans??? [Maria changes to the word *some*.]

When Ms. May welcomed student perspectives, the lesson was anything but "cut and dry" because students drew from rich knowledge and understandings of stereotypes. Although the initial planning involved stereotypes about Mexicans, the class conversation took a different path and per-

petuated stereotypes about Americans in the U.S. The students were brimming with ideas about how to characterize American culture (un)fairly, as the teacher tried to emphasize accuracy and precise use of English adjectives. Indeed, she limited Angelo's input by warning him about appropriate use of *none*.

On another day, class conversation continued to focus on negative perceptions of American culture. Ms. May repeatedly questioned students' uses of the adjective *most* and their inaccurate generalizations. The evidence suggests that introducing a relevant and humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 2003) is not a straightforward path from the delivery of a lesson to the mastery of ELD or content objectives. In fact, a teacher may seem to get derailed from language goals, especially reductionist and isolated language goals, unless the goals explicitly target engagement in extended discourse and communicative uses of grammatical features. Language goals for this lesson include trying out and practicing socially appropriate uses of English forms. Yet, as Lucero demonstrates in this excerpt, students were persistent in their inaccurate use of adjectives and reflected social positions in a stratified society.

JANET: This is true: Some Americans lay around and watch video games.

ADELINA: Some Americans have blond hair.

DANIEL: A few Americans are lazy and fat and drink a lot of soda.

MS. MAY: So if I come from Jupiter, I guess I don't want to come back, sounds like Americans are lazy and sitting around.

LUCERO: Most Americans, they get like a *mesera* and sit on the ground and see the TV.

MS. MAY: Like a maid? Most Americans have maids? Most, Lucero?

LUCERO: Yah. Up the hill, it's like a full house, all the street

MS. MAY: Maybe *some*... some Americans have maids

Earlier in the year, the Latino students had faced stereotypes about Mexicans being lazy, but the instructional path during class conversations shifted to stereotypes about Americans being lazy. Lucero added the image of Americans as rich and indulgent, employing maids and owning houses spanning a city block. For Lucero, there seemed to be a disjuncture with the American lifestyle, power relationships, and affluence. Student responses had undertones of marginaliza-

***The lesson . . . drew upon the harsh reality of stereotypes.***

tion from the upper- or middle-class mainstream society, with comments about big houses and hired servants. Generally, students perpetuated stereotypes of Americans as unhealthy, inactive, and tuned in to electronic media. As Ms. May tried to stay focused on the English form of quantifying adjectives, students veered off onto socially-motivated and power-laden topics that possibly distracted from the accurate use of adjectives in this lesson. Ms. May's layered, multi-faceted approach in this lesson was anything but simple or reductionist because it opened the doors to a wealth of critical questions and fodder for study.

### **Where do we go from here?**

A broad and complex approach to teaching and learning invites the "messiness" and multiple foci of ELD and content lessons. In this study, although the lessons were challenging for the teacher, students contributed vigorously to conversations that were personal and relevant to their lives. They

used their voices and tried out variations of adjectives, demonstrating a communicative model of learning, although not always applying them in socially appropriate ways. Following this complex approach, teachers have to become jugglers to navigate across multiple objectives within a lesson and explorers to embrace opportunities to question and investigate social dilemmas with students. But this perspective is important for countering reductionist and decontextualized language pedagogies evident in ESOL education today. According to Bartolomé (2003), to promote academic success for students historically underserved by schools, we need to select reciprocal teaching approaches—in which power is shared by teacher and students—that embrace students’ backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences in language and content lessons.

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