

Experience ELL

Shadowing

By Ivannia Soto

Provide teachers with an unobstructed view of how to enhance language development for English-language learners.

My parents immigrated to the United States from Costa Rica—my mother when she was 11 years old, and my father when he was 21. My mother went to school in the Los Angeles Unified School District during a time when a systemic plan for working with English-language learners (ELLs) was uncharted territory. Although she spent many more years in American schools than in Costa Rican schools, she quickly noticed in high school that she was not developing the English-language skills that she would need to become proficient. Being a self-starter, my mother became her own advocate and enrolled herself in additional adult English classes in order to receive the English-language instruction that she needed and deserved.



Unfortunately, systemic failure to meet the instructional needs of ELLs still exists today. The same inequities that my mother contended with over 50 years ago continue even though we now have a strong body of research literature pointing toward best practices with ELLs, and more and more district, state, and federal policies are in place to meet the instructional needs of ELLs.

When I review data and see that the achievement gap still exists, read articles about the politics of why we are not educationally advancing the way we need to, or work with districts that are in state sanction because they are not making adequate yearly progress with their ELLs, I refuse to stop trying to create change within systems. I see all of these issues through the lens of one person—my mother—and that keeps me going. That is the purpose of ELL shadowing—reflecting on the life of a child in English language transition who may be experiencing school slightly differently than native English speakers.

What Is ELL Shadowing?

ELL shadowing allows teachers to see firsthand, in classrooms that look like their own, the sense of urgency that exists when the specific needs of ELLs

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are not addressed systemically. Laurie Olsen, author of “Ensuring Academic Success for English Learners,” explains that there are different kinds of ELLs: newcomers who are highly literate, educated, or under-schooled; long-term ELLs who have been in the country six years or longer; and ELLs progressing predictably through the developmental sequence. It is imperative to tailor instruction and professional development to the specific needs of the ELLs at a school site.

This means that if most ELLs at a particular school are at the midrange of English-language proficiency, students at that level of language progression should be tracked for the ELL shadowing experience. This will allow the system to draw attention to that particular level of proficiency need, while encouraging everyone to focus on that one specific group for a particular period of time. Educators will then also be able to target follow-up professional development sessions and focus on instructional strategies for that specific group of ELLs.

Members of a system do not often get the opportunity to reflect on their practices and focus their efforts in one direction. ELL shadowing allows all teachers within a system to focus on the specific needs of an ELL through the lens of one child.

The experience begins at the individual ELL student level because educators often look at groups of students and subgroups, but do not have the opportunity to observe the instructional

experiences of individual students. The results from the ELL shadowing experience can certainly be generalized and leveraged as patterns and themes are analyzed. But it is first essential to explore what it is like to go through school needing to do “double the work”—that is, processing both language and content.

Language and Content Development

Unfortunately, quiet classrooms have historically been thought of as good classrooms. We have thought that rows of students who compliantly listen while the teacher imparts knowledge into empty receptacles are best practice. Instead, what we must develop in a classroom setting is a culture of talking often about academic topics. We must find the language in the curriculum and elicit the voices in our classrooms.

Even the best instructional materials or programs may not emphasize the importance of academic oral language development in a classroom setting. Educators must infuse language through specific techniques and structures that *require* classroom talk. This means that school leaders must give teachers the time and support to re-infuse academic oral language development into instructional materials.

In order to create more academic oral language classroom settings, teachers must also be given the time to work in teams, by department or by grade level, in order

to develop meaningful academic oral language development tasks. There must be a commitment to academic oral language development by everyone in the system in order for ELLs to be successful throughout their schooling experiences.

The Shadowing Process

ELL shadowing is a professional development design in which a teacher observes a single ELL during the course of a school day. The two-day process involves selecting an ELL (at random or at a predetermined English-language proficiency level); training; following the student for two to three hours, noting academic speaking and listening experiences at every five-minute interval; and then appropriate professional development.

During Day 1 of the professional development session, teachers are trained to monitor the domains of listening and academic speaking at five-minute intervals, for at least two consecutive hours. Academic listening is monitored in terms of whether a student is listening mostly to another student, to the teacher, to a small group, or to the whole class.

Academic speaking gauges whether the primary speaker is a student or the teacher. It also determines whether the student is speaking mostly to another student, the teacher, a small group, or the whole class, and then whether the teacher is speaking mostly to a student, a small group, or the whole class.

Shadowing, then, takes place on Day 2, after the participants have studied the domains of listening and academic speaking. It is important that participants understand that they are monitoring the primary situation that is occurring at the top of the five-minute interval, and not for the entire five-minute interval itself.

Additionally, it is important to note that the purpose of shadowing is to explore a day in the life of an ELL. It is not to create a running record, whereby everything within that time period is written down. Instead, educa-

tors should only take down what is happening *most* at the beginning of that five-minute time frame so that general trends and patterns can be discussed within a system. ELL shadowing serves as a beginning stage for learning about ELLs and tailoring instruction for their needs. To maximize the shadowing experience, there must be a clear and focused plan to change practices.

Next Steps

After ELL shadowing, subsequent professional development can be differentiated and tailored so that the academic needs of ELLs within that particular system are met.

ELL shadowing can enhance and accompany other initiatives by placing a spotlight on the needs of ELLs within a system. It can be used alongside existing professional development structures, such as instructional coaching models, professional learning communities, and response to intervention.

Once specific needs have been determined for ELLs using the shadowing experience, school leaders can help teachers introduce new strategies to elicit more academic oral language development in the classroom setting using, for example, teacher-guided reporting. This strategy encourages language development in the classroom setting and should be used when students do not have enough language to describe what they want to say on their own.

According to Pauline Gibbons, author of *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*, teacher-guided reporting requires:

- Open-ended questions (multiple entry ways, no one-word responses);
- Clarifying questions (linguistic, more detail, complete sentences);
- Encouragement (taking language risks); and
- Recasting (restating in academic terms).

It is important to use this strategy only once all students in the class, especially ELLs, have received com-

mon information or input so that background knowledge or content knowledge does not impede the language support provided. In other words, since students will not have to focus on a cognitively demanding task that they have not yet been exposed to, they will be able to focus on the language necessary to complete an academic conversation.

Professional Development and Beyond

If the majority of ELLs at a particular school site have the same need in terms of academic oral language development, then professional development should be targeted in that vein. As the ELL shadowing data collected is used in conjunction with student assessment data, the specific needs of this student group can be targeted.

Since staff development data also tells us that teachers need at least 50 hours of professional development in a particular focus area to create change, it is important to follow up shadowing by providing targeted professional development that will meet the needs of ELLs at each particular site. For example, if the analysis finds that most ELLs at a site are at the mid-range of English-language proficiency, with few systemic opportunities for academic oral language development, then principals can encourage teachers to incorporate specific strategies to meet those language demands.

We must not rest until every group of students receives the kind of education that they deserve. Shadowing sheds light on the specific linguistic and cultural needs of ELLs, creating a process for educators to create systemic instructional change to close the achievement gap. ■

Soto, Ivannia. *ELL Shadowing as a Catalyst for Change*. pp. 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 20-23, 24-30, 57, 58, 98, 105. Copyright 2012 by Corwin. Reprinted by Permission of SAGE Publications, Inc.

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Find a broad range of **resources, lesson plans, and teaching tips** for English-language instruction from **everythingESL.net**.