CREATE Brief

August 2012 www.cal.org/create

Using Literacy Coaching to Promote the Teaching and Learning of English Learners in Content Areas

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Introduction

Literacy coaching was provided as part of a multi-year research project aimed at improving the teaching and learning of English learners across seventh grade content areas (English language arts, math, science, and social studies). Coaching, a sustained classroom-based support, is meant to deliver guidance from a qualified and knowledgeable person who models research-based strategies and explores with teachers how to incorporate those practices with their own students (Sailors & Shanklin, 2010, p. 1). The rationale for including a coaching component was to extend professional development into day-to-day classroom settings, to facilitate implementation of the project interventions, to provide an opportunity for discussion and reflection, and to build educator capacity to sustain practices intended to improve the education of English learners. Ongoing coaching activities involved lesson demonstrations, observations with feedback, support of instructional planning and lesson preparation, and debriefings with time for teacher reflection and goal setting.

The challenge of helping adolescent learners who may have underdeveloped language and literacy skills to succeed academically across content areas requires educators to adjust their instruction to promote English language acquisition. Unfortunately, secondary teachers often express feeling ill prepared to address the learning needs of English learners within the confines of delivering specific instruction (Pawan & Craig, 2011). The Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners (CREATE), funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, U. S. Department of Education, was established to address concerns involving the education of English learners in the middle grades (4–8). CREATE is a partnership of researchers from several institutions tasked with (a) developing and testing research-based academic interventions in controlled experiments and randomized field trials with classroom teachers, (b) rigorously testing the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (see Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2010), (c) combining interventions and the SIOP Model into a comprehensive package, and (d) testing the effectiveness of the combined package in randomized experiments.

Prior to offering a combined intervention package, project researchers had established and empirically tested curriculum enhancements that investigated effective features of instruction for English learners, including peer pairing and group work, increased opportunities for written and oral discourse, and direct teaching of vocabulary and academic language (see August, Branum-Martin, Cardenas-Hagan, & Francis, 2009; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009; Vaughn, Martinez, Linan-Thompson, Reutebuch, Carlson, & Francis, 2009). During the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years, studies of the combined intervention package were conducted with two non-overlapping cohorts of teachers in a large urban district in central Texas. The SIOP Model was integrated into all the academic interventions and served as the project's framework for addressing the needs of English learners. Although mathematics had no curriculum intervention, efforts in that discipline concentrated on using the SIOP Model to augment day-to-day instructional practices. Eight participating campuses (four in 2009-2010 and four in 2010-2011) agreed to adopt these fully developed interventions that were intended to replace typical daily instruction for the entire class period for up

to 13 weeks in science and social studies and to supplement instruction in English language arts for 20 minutes per day across the seventh grade.

Throughout the course of study on the combined intervention package, literacy coaches from the CREATE research team worked onsite at middle school campuses to help seventh grade teachers learn about evidence-based practices and how to assimilate them into their classrooms. While coaching was not the focus of the investigation, researchers reasoned that the use of coaches might be advantageous in getting evidenced-based practices into the treatment classrooms more quickly and with a higher level of implementation and fidelity. Although the coaching experience described here is narrow in its scope, this brief offers researchers, practitioners, and those in school leadership positions insights from project efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning with coaching as a moderating variable.

Extending Professional Development

Coaching has the potential to apply and prolong professional development and inservice learning or skill development directly in the classroom (Kamil, 2003; Sailors & Shanklin, 2010; Steckel, 2009). Paired with onsite professional development, coaching may ultimately lead to the transfer and sustainability of evidence-based practices into daily instruction and routines as teachers develop a deeper understanding of these practices (Knight & Cornett, n.d). Coaching is becoming prevalent in schools as a way to increase student achievement and to more adequately prepare educators to meet students' learning needs.

Prior to the intervention start date in the schools, coaches, teachers, some district- and school-level administrators, and instructional specialists attended 3 days of professional development on the SIOP Model in the fall of 2009 and 2 days in 2010. For teachers of science, social studies, and English language arts, discipline-specific sessions (generally 1–2 days, although this varied slightly by content area) on intervention procedures, materials, roles, and responsibilities were also presented prior to the start date. In 2010, a SIOP-specific session was added for teachers of math. These professional development offerings were reinforced with onsite coaching.

The Role of the Secondary Literacy Coach

CREATE coaches worked directly with content area teachers to build reading and language skills as well as vocabulary and content knowledge across all disciplines. This role is different from that of traditional reading coaches, who focus on improving reading and overall achievement and may have supervisory duties and work directly with students.

The CREATE coaching staff was independent of the schools and the district where research was being conducted. They had no site-based duties other than to support the participating educators. Coaches spent the majority of their time on school campuses working one-on-one with classroom teachers or grade-level teams. Coaching responsibilities included modeling, discussing issues and concerns, and assisting in planning and preparing for upcoming lessons. The remainder of the coaches' time was devoted to project paperwork, preparation, ongoing training, and coaching meetings. In general, one coach was assigned to one of the four participating treatment campuses with a load of 10 or 11 teachers throughout each intervention period. In some instances, an additional coach was dispatched to support one or two teachers at campuses with more than two teachers in any discipline. In those cases, one coach served as the lead contact across the grade level.

Minimum requirements for selection of coaches included (a) a master's degree or higher in education that focused on reading/literacy/language learning, curriculum and instruction, or related fields (e.g., special education, educational psychology); (b) 3 years or more of classroom teaching; (c) experience providing professional development; (d) knowledge of adolescent learners, adult learners, and English learners; and (e) experience in providing supervision, mentoring, or coaching.

Coaches were initially perceived by teachers as outsiders on the campuses. Teaching credentials were questioned, with participants asking if coaches had teaching experience at the middle school level. One teacher expressed her fear that coaches would come into her class to promote the teaching of phonics and other practices associated with foundational reading skills. Another commented, "You researchers have a lot of book knowledge, but don't know anything about teaching in the real world." Coaches worked to build rapport and cooperative working relationships with the school personnel, particularly with the classroom teachers to whom they were assigned. One teacher asked, "What are you gonna do for me since I am the one with the degree in history?" His coach replied, "Yes, you are the content expert and I am not here to change what you teach, but rather to help with how you teach it." This type of approach acknowledged that all involved had complementary skill sets and allowed for the foster-

ing of efficacious relationships. This coach went on to explain, "Together, your content knowledge and my knowledge of literacy development and strategies might be just what the students you told me you were worried about need to be successful with your curriculum."

The CREATE Coaching Model

The CREATE coaching model was designed to be flexible and responsive to teachers' needs and to their comfort level with the content, teaching of English learners, project materials, lesson enhancements, and SIOP Model components. The coaches recognized that participating teachers held varying beliefs, attitudes, and levels of expertise, all of which were likely to affect the extent to which they were willing to embed reading and language development strategies into their content area instruction and to maintain their use. The model adopted also took into account that not all campus staff members were as enthusiastic about inclusion in the research study as the district officials who designated which campuses would take part. While involvement was at will, individual teachers and school administrators may have felt obliged to follow the district's wishes and therefore did not opt out. Research staff observed tensions between some campus and district leaders regarding participation that led to lukewarm support of research activities and may have negatively impacted teachers' full engagement in implementation of the interventions or in coaching. Furthermore, implementation efforts by some classroom teachers were hindered by personal problems (e.g., divorce, death, illness), varied educational philosophies, dislike of all or part of the project (e.g., materials that included scripted lessons, curriculum enhancements, SIOP components, coaching), and/or anxiety in being under the research lens.

Rather than assuming the role of experts trying to assert what must be implemented, the coaches took a responsive stance, acting as a buffer between the researchers and practitioners with their main goal to help willing teachers try to implement the interventions as designed. Responsive coaching has been described as a better approach to long-lasting changes in classroom practices than more directive approaches (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Dozier, 2006; Ippolito, 2010). In many instances, the coaches' ability to listen to where the teachers were coming from and where they wanted to be instead of imposing their own ideas allowed for a successful partnering. When teachers felt safe in their attempts to follow the intervention as designed, as well as in their endeavors at making adjustments if they believed students needed something more or different from what was provided, they were more likely to share criticisms or suggestions for improvements with the coaches or directly with curriculum designers. Once criticisms or suggestions were voiced, the research team could act and often did so immediately, whether it was to send out revised lessons or additional materials to improve lesson activities. By acknowledging teachers as important contributors to the CREATE program and responding to their feedback, coaches were able to alleviate some of the educators' fears about participation in the project and coaching.

Coaching support was divided into three distinct phases, with levels of support decreasing as teachers became more adept with the interventions (see Figure 1). During the Initial Coaching Phase, coaches spent most of their time with teachers, modeling lessons or SIOP Model components and offering feedback as teachers began implementation. For instance, the content interventions all involved some type of teacher think-aloud or read-aloud, which often took much longer than the suggested times, so coaches proposed use of a timer to help pacing. They also met individually with teachers during the first few weeks of implementation to talk through problem areas, such as the curricula not always aligning with the district scope and sequence, or difficulties with lessons as designed, as well as issues related to classroom and time management.

In the second phase, Coaching With Feedback, formal SIOP Model observations with follow-up debriefing sessions were conducted every 2 weeks. These observations focused on implementation of the SIOP Model features. This provided an opportunity for the coach to emphasize SIOP components that were at times overshadowed by the academic interventions. Although most participants agreed to the formal SIOP observations, not all chose to participate in the conferencing because of time constraints or dislike of the SIOP aspect of the project. For example, one science teacher put it bluntly, "Look, I'm willing to do this [science intervention] because these kids need it, but I already do that other stuff [SIOP components] and it is insulting that researchers from up in their ivory tower who don't know me or my kids think that they can tell me what I need to do."

During SIOP-focused observations, coaches completed SIOP Model coaching logs (D. Short, personal communication, August 18, 2009) to guide discussion of the model's features and their execution within a

Initial Coaching Phase

(Weeks 1–3)

- Once a week informal classroom visit
- Focus on building rapport and guiding implementation through modeling and demonstration lessons
- Post-class visit/conferences

Coaching With Feedback Phase

(Weeks 4–8)

- Biweekly formal, scheduled SIOP Model observation with debriefing session
- Follow-up through additional meetings, phone calls, e-mail correspondence
- Conferencing/planning meeting

Transitional Coaching Phase

(Weeks 9 and on)

- Biweekly formal, scheduled SIOP Model observation with debriefing session or general (i.e., not specific to SIOP) conferencing/ planning meeting
- Meetings with grade-level or content-specific teams
- Individual conferences as needed

Figure 1. **Coaching phases.**

Coaching Observation Log 2009–2010

Coach:

Date:

Teacher/Class Code:

Subject:_____Topic:_____

SIOP Focus: _____ Length of Observation:_____mins

1. Were the focal components or features implemented? To what extent?
2. Of the suggestions and coaching that you provided during the last visit, did the teacher make improvements? Which ones? How so?
3. What components or features did you suggest that the teacher work on for next time?
4. What was your overall impression (e.g., additional components or features the teacher implemented well, classroom management, students on task, time management, etc.)?

Figure 2. **Coaching observation log 2009–2010.**
Source. Courtesy of Deborah Short with adaptations by author.

Coaching Observation Log 2010–2011

School:

Date:

Length of Observation:

Teacher Code:

Subject:

Period:

Content Objectives	Yes/No	Notes
1. Posted		
2. Written in student-friendly language		
3. Meaningful and aligned with lesson taught		
Language Objectives		
1. Posted		
2. Written in student-friendly language		
3. Meaningful and aligned with lesson taught		

*Focus Component= _____

Notes

Figure 3. **Coaching observation log 2010–2011.**
Source. Courtesy of C. Richards-Tutor with adaptations by author.

presented lesson (see Figure 2). The log was used as a tool to drive reflection and goal setting. For example, review of a completed log reveals that the coach asked a teacher to reflect on whether the outcomes she wanted in her observed lesson were achieved. The log indicates that the teacher intended for students to work in cooperative groups to solve multiplication problems. However, students did not have a clear understanding of the goal, so they worked independently and then shared out their answers.

During the second year of the school-wide investigation, SIOP investigators adapted the log to concentrate coaching attention on the SIOP component of Lesson Preparation (C. Richards-Tutor, personal communication, October 18, 2010). This was in response to a review of the previous year's logs that revealed lessons were lacking in this area deemed critical to the SIOP Model's success (see Figure 3). These logs were submitted to SIOP researchers for analysis but were not shared with district or school personnel because of the coaches' commitment to keep the coaching relationship private.

The last phase, Transitional Coaching Phase, was aimed at encouraging teacher autonomy for implementation, instructional planning, and decision making. In this phase, the coaches continued to conduct formal SIOP observations and debriefings, but by this point some educators had shifted from individual to school-wide concerns. At Leal Middle School,[1] all participating teachers realized that their students' poor performance on tests at the end of the third 6-week grading period was influenced more by weak academic language skills than by a lack of content-specific knowledge, so they asked their coach to help them in this area. Thus individual conferences often gave way to conferences that

included content or grade-level teams (e.g., all seventh-grade science teachers or content area teams consisting of one teacher from each discipline). Although the phases of coaching were distinct, coaching was responsive to teachers' development. There was not a linear progression through the coaching phases because of differences in teachers' implementation; with some teachers, coaches moved straight into the later phases, and with others, coaches stayed at phase one because teachers made little or no movement at all. Science teachers at one campus had become such devotees to the content enhancements and SIOP Model features after the first few weeks of implementation that they worked to develop additional lessons that picked up where the intervention materials left off. In addition, these teachers worked over the summer to help other grade levels develop science lessons that included CREATE program features. Their coaching needs were very different from those of the two or three teachers per campus who were noted to have used the CREATE lessons and SIOP features only on days when the coach was around. Other teachers adapted the CREATE lessons and practices, but in a manner not adequate to meet English learners' needs. One social studies participant pretaught all the vocabulary in a unit, but instead of introducing three or four words a day as designed, he introduced all the words for a unit on the first day of the week. For these teachers, the earlier phases of coaching were appropriate.

Coaching activities were shaped to respect teachers' schedules and needs. In addition to formal SIOP observations, more informal weekly check-ins also occurred during teachers' conference periods, lunch breaks, and other times when teachers indicated they were available. A few teachers indicated that phone calls or e-mail correspondence was preferable for observation follow-up, and the coaches abided by their wishes. Participants were urged to contact their coach or project coordinator to request more or less frequent coaching. Further, participants could withdraw from study activities at any time, with no repercussions from school or district personnel or the research team.

Information from check-ins with teachers, teacher self-reports gathered during initial professional development sessions, and completed SIOP logs revealed various levels of project interest and involvement, which required different types of coaching behaviors. During the first 3 weeks of implementation, the decision was made that the CREATE staff would concentrate on teachers who were most receptive to implementing the project lessons and strategies with coaching support. Although the original intention was to provide coaching for all of the project teachers, the actual number and type of coaching sessions held were related to several factors in the schools, including educators' attitudes toward coaching and toward the project as a whole. While about half of the 40 participants in each cohort were open to coaching, others found it disruptive to their routines or students, or unnecessary. As one teacher put it, "I am a good teacher. You [coaches] should spend your time with someone who needs help." Interruptions to class schedules (e.g., assessments, testing preparation, nonacademic activities) along with the school context in which coaches were placed also affected the amount of coaching that could be provided.

Coaches intended to offer what Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) have classified as helpful coaching behaviors: facilitating, demonstrating, and encouraging. But during a weekly coaches meeting held soon after coaches began classroom visits, the staff identified the act of acknowledging and accepting participant resistance for whatever reasons as the most important thing they could offer. Teachers who felt they could not commit fully to the project expressed appreciation for not being pressured. "Thank you for understanding where I am coming from," Mrs. Ivy commented to her coach. "This could be really hard, but you just come and listen and I appreciate that," she continued.

As facilitators, coaches could assist with preparation and review of materials collaboratively with teachers, as well as listen to and support their struggles, successes, and reflections. In the role of demonstrators, they focused on modeling lessons and strategies for individual educators in small groups or during class sessions, and provided many practice opportunities for teachers who were uncomfortable with and apprehensive about enhancing and possibly changing their instructional practices. Finally, as encouragers, coaches attempted to establish an atmosphere in which teachers felt safe to implement and honestly evaluate materials and instructional activities and to reflect on how and if their typical practices and beliefs were being impacted. Mr. Franklin's experience is an example of how being part of the study altered his view about the capabilities of second language learners. Prior to implementing he lamented that, "These kids could not and would not participate in class discussions, so I have to do all the talking." Several weeks into the study he commented how surprised he was that English learners where willing and excited to talk on topic when given the opportunity.

Lessons Learned

In this study, coaching was confined to very specific objectives; that is, to support a combined intervention package, rather than a general focus on improving instruction. Coaches went into classes knowing that change is hard and that teachers are generally resistant to being forced into it. Therefore, coaching efforts were meant to accept and acknowledge resistance to participation, and when possible to facilitate, demonstrate, and encourage—but not coerce—the use of research-based materials, instructional practices, and teaching and learning strategies. For the coaches, their own knowledge about reading and literacy development for adolescents was critical to their effectiveness, but using that knowledge for practical purposes was shaped by an intimate understanding of middle- and upper-grade culture and students, as well as by consideration of stresses and demands on the content area teacher.

Intervention research conducted in school settings is at best a messy enterprise, especially when research goals and objectives do not mesh with established customs. The study design presented many challenges. The intervention started in the middle of the first semester and ended before the end of the second so teachers had to switch back and forth between traditional instructional practices and materials. It also included many components (academic and SIOP Model interventions, some of which competed with existing programs favored by district leaders and/or school level administrators). The presence in the school of so many project staff—investigators, project coordinators, coaches, testers—proved overwhelming to some. Moreover, those involved, including the researchers, did not all have common expectations for coaching (e.g., responsive versus directive).

There were also drawbacks with the coaching model and coaches. The coaching staff's employment began just as the first professional development sessions were scheduled, leaving them insufficient time to prepare, meaning they were learning about SIOP and the specific content area materials and intervention procedures at the same time teachers were. Additionally, the coaching assignment at the school ended once posttesting started, just as some teachers indicated that they were coming to value it. Although all coaches were highly credentialed, some personalities and skills were better suited than others to their assigned campuses and teachers. In some cases, it was not professional attributes, but personal connections that influenced the success of a coaching relationship. In one situation, a teacher had expressed that her coach had little to offer her as she herself held a doctorate in curriculum studies. However, the discovery of a shared interest in the Glee television show opened the door to a successful union. Finally, none of the coaches had secondary-specific content knowledge and that did hamper their abilities at times, especially when teachers did not possess strong content knowledge themselves—some were new to the grade level or were teaching out of content (e.g., a math educator assigned to take over a social studies class).

Despite the many complications, changes to teaching were evident. Science teachers that had long discontinued experiments dusted off their beakers. Social studies teachers began to allow the exploration of perspectives other than those presented in the textbooks. English language arts teachers incorporated word study activities into a curriculum where only literature-related terms had been the norm for instruction. Math teachers identified engagement as an area where they wanted to improve their lessons. Grade-level teams began to reflect on areas where they could build student language across the curriculum and in many classrooms it became acceptable to use one language in support of another. "It wasn't all unicorns and sparkles," one initially hesitant teacher commented about her project involvement. "Sometimes we did not see eye to eye, but seeing the difference in the students made it all worthwhile," she added.

The CREATE coaching experience suggests that coaching is viable for promoting a shift in teachers' instructional beliefs and practices when they are open and willing to take an active part in coaching and when there are classroom structures and procedures in place to control for student behaviors and expectations for learning so that improving instruction can be the focus of continued professional development. Project coaches were able to help some participants try new practices, incorporate evidence-based strategies, and ground instructional decisions in research (conducting think- and read-alouds, preselecting and teaching vocabulary and concepts, and promoting student-led discussion). Participating teachers who had strong support from their school-level leadership team (principal, assistant principals, curriculum specialists), along with sufficient time for instructional planning and problem solving, and who were devoted to addressing the challenges of promoting language and literacy development within content area instruction, were much more likely to engage in coaching and to identify its potential for their own development along with that of their students.

Note

[1] All names of schools and school staff appearing in this brief have been changed to protect their privacy.

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The Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners (CREATE) conducts a program of research designed to address specific challenges in the education of English language learners in Grades 4-8. CREATE is a partnership of researchers from six institutions:

- Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics, University of Houston
- California State University, Long Beach
- Center for Applied Linguistics
- Harvard University
- University of California-Berkeley
- Vaughn Gross Center, University of Texas at Austin

This brief was produced by CREATE with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Institute of Education Sciences, under Contract No. ED-R305A05056. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED. This document is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission.