

# CHANGING TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARD INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE THROUGH SUSTAINED SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP\*

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## Abstract

Educating students from linguistically diverse backgrounds has historically been the domain of the ESL teacher. However, new migration patterns and changing student demographics force the mainstream teacher into a new role: the language and content teacher. In order to embrace this new role, educators must implement instructional strategies effective for ELLs as they continue teach the content of their grade level. The researchers identified this change as an opportunity to collaborate in providing professional development for principals and elementary teachers of English language learners (ELLs) and to evaluate the effectiveness of this professional development in developing instructional leaders within this new context of diverse demographics.



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## 1 Introduction

The professional development in this study emanated from a district level request to the university who in turn involved faculty with expertise in the area of need. From this initial collaboration the following parties became intimately involved with the planning and delivery of the content-based instructional practices (CBI) professional development: the university's office of professional development, university faculty, district level coordinators, principals, counselors, media specialists, ESL teachers, and teachers in a rural school district in eastern North Carolina.

Initially, the research focused on determining the effectiveness of CBI professional development with subsequent monthly implementation sessions in comparison to the same professional development without the benefit of follow-up sessions. As the research progressed, it became evident that not only was effectiveness of the professional development being measured, but so were a variety of other factors. The researchers were able to record evidence of improved teaching practices and developing leadership roles for teachers. Administrative support, both at the school and district level, played an important role in the success of the professional development. Finally, since positively impacting students' achievement is the goal of professional development, the students' use and development of academic language was observed.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Current professional development standards (National Staff Development Council [NSDC], 2000) emphasize the need for professional development to be sustained, data-driven, and related to the work in the classroom. Furthermore, programs must focus on the content to be delivered, context of the professional development, and the process of delivery, implementation, and evaluation. This project partnered individuals skilled to meet all of these criteria: a faculty member with expertise in the content to be delivered, an experienced educational leader, and a facilitator of effective professional development. The three authors ascertained that the standards of successful professional development were met.

### 2.1 Content

In this study, the school district's needed professional development in content-based instructional practices (CBI). Specifically, two schools had experienced rapid growth of ELL students and mainstream teachers were in need of modifying their instruction to facilitate learning of their content to their changing student demographic population. The researchers selected the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model as the CBI. SIOP is a research based model of instruction whose goal is to integrate the teaching of language while simultaneously teaching content standards. The primary focus of this model is the acquisition of the specialized academic language proficiency which will enable the students to achieve the course standards while acquiring English (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Short & Echevarria, 2004). Although this model was originally designed to meet the needs of a growing population of English Language learners, it has been used successfully for all students. As No Child Left Behind (NCLB) creates an increased need for student achievement, other instructional strategies must be investigated. Many students come to school from homes of low socioeconomic status, have environments which are not rich in both standard and academic English and speak a marginalized dialect of English. Marzano (2004) asserts that this has profound effect on academic achievement and that these students will benefit greatly from a program of instruction that highlights the importance of academic language proficiency.

The SIOP Model is a model of sheltered instruction. This concept of sheltered instruction is easily understood if one thinks of language instruction not just as learning how to speak a second language, but learning specific content in a second language. For example, ESL programs had historically had texts that approached language learning from the perspective of learning grammar and basic functional words. There was no serious focused content to the lessons as was the case with our foreign language education programs where language was often "taught in a vacuum". In ESL classrooms, most students were learning survival English which addressed only basic life skills. As time progressed, the field of English for Special Purposes and Academic Purposes evolved. These fields built on the findings and approaches from the Cognitive

Academic Language Learning Approach (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The classes were teaching English, but the texts, the vocabulary and the tasks the students were performing were related to a specific content area such as nursing, engineering, business or academic college preparation.

The K-12 sector has been slow to adopt an integrated approach to language instruction. The SIOP Model has done just that-it has taken the standard course of study that our students are required to learn and has made it the basis for language instruction. No longer is language being taught in a vacuum, but it is being taught using the language on which the students will be tested and the language with which the students need to become fluent for academic success.

## 2.2 Context

Like many districts in rural, eastern North Carolina, the population of Latino students has increased rapidly during the past decade and now comprises 22% of the total student population in the district (NCDPI, 2007). Achievement scores for Latino ELLs in the district lag behind other student groups and the cohort graduation rate for Latino students is 51% as compared to 68% for the district (NCDPI). To improve ELL achievement and cohort graduation rates the district sought support from faculty in the College of Education to provide professional development focused specifically on reaching the needs of Latino ELLs and their teachers. The teachers in the district were accomplished, nearly a third hold advanced degrees, but meeting the need of this particular group of students required additional support from their university partners.

Faculty in the College of Education are often called upon to provide in-service training for teachers, but this model of professional development benefitted from the collaboration of many key stakeholders, including district level administrators willing to fund the program, school level administrators committed to supporting teachers as they implemented the SIOP model, teachers willing to take a chance on something new, and university faculty committed to providing sustained support and mentoring throughout the project. Through the combined support from the school, district, and university levels, the teachers were able to implement the SIOP model in their classes for the benefit of all their students and to sow the seeds of leadership development in their own profession.

## 2.3 Process

Guskey's (1986) framework for professional development proposes that teacher attitudes and beliefs toward a new strategy will only change once they are found to positively impact student learning. Strategies found to be ineffective are not adopted into the teacher's practice. The professional development workshop offered in this study was followed by monthly meetings and classroom observations to assess implementation and offer support for teachers. Once implemented, teachers found that the new strategies yielded a positive impact on student achievement. More recently, Guskey (2000) outlined a five level framework for evaluating professional development: (1) participants' reactions; (2) participants' learning; (3) organization support and change; (4) participants' use of new knowledge and skills; (5) student learning outcomes. Each successive level leads professional development planners and participants closer to the ultimate goal of impacting student learning. Each level also allows the evaluators to collect different pieces of evidence to support the value of the activity to the teacher participant, school community, and student.

## 3 Methodology

An experimental approach was utilized to determine the effects of a yearlong professional development project on teaching behaviors of a select group of elementary teachers in a rural school district in North Carolina. The content CBI professional development was delivered using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model of instruction. This model is an empirically tested research-based approach aimed at integrating academic language and content for English language learners (Echevarria et al., 2004).

Utilizing Guskey's (2000) theoretical framework, the researchers employed a variety of metrics to determine results of the ongoing professional development. Data were evaluated from five levels: the initial

workshop; participant knowledge; organizational support for the professional development; participant implementation; and student outcomes. Quantitative (pre and post tests) and qualitative data (surveys, interviews, observations) were collected in each of the levels of professional development from the experimental group ( $N=10$ ) and a control group ( $N=13$ ). The initial workshop on the SIOP was held summer 2007 over two and a half days. Participants during this initial workshop had the opportunity to understand the theory on which the SIOP is based on and also practice with feedback the SIOP. Both the experimental and control group received the same training and participated in the same activities. The experimental group participated in yearlong professional development from August 2007 to June 2008. Activities that included: monthly meetings; observation by peers, principals, and researchers; instructional dialogue; ongoing feedback by researchers, principals, and peers. Additional details of the follow up activities are described in the results section of this paper. The control group did not receive any ongoing professional development after the initial in-service training.

## 4 Results

Results will be discussed using Guskey's (2000) levels of professional development evaluation.

### 4.1 Level 1 and 2 Participants Reactions and Participants Learning

The results from this study indicated that the initial SIOP workshop, conducted over multiple days, presented a clear and comprehensive picture of the SIOP model of instruction to both the control group and the experimental group. This initial presentation resulted in 100% of the teachers and principals indicating their intent to implement the model at their schools and in their classrooms. A list of teachers needs was generated to ensure implementation. Items included in the list were: time for planning; materials and supplies; ongoing feedback; clarification of expectation from principals in terms of lesson plans and requirements for evaluation.

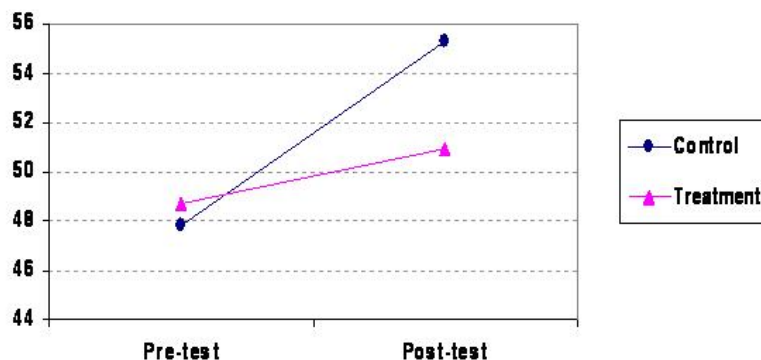
Note: At this time the paper will skip level 3 to follow the teacher implementation path with a description of level 4 – participants' use of the new knowledge. Level 3 will be discussed immediately after the implementation to describe how organizational support aided with implementation.

### 4.2 Level 4 Participants Use of New Knowledge and Skill

In order to evaluate the level of use of the SIOP in the classroom this study triangulated three sources of data, teachers' self-assessment of use, researchers' classroom observations, and principals' observations. Initial self assessments on the SIOP were collected prior to the initial training and again at the end of the ten months of professional development. Both groups of SIOP workshop participants, those who received the follow-up support (experimental group) and those who only received the initial summer training (control group). Teachers who participated in the experimental group improved their current teaching practices significantly by implementing the SIOP model,  $t(9) = 3.01$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $g = 0.37$ , whereas the teachers in the control group did not increase the frequency of their practice,  $t(12) = 1.71$ ,  $p = 0.11$ ,  $g = 0.39$  (see Figure 1).

The results of the SIOP self-assessment between the experimental group and the control group indicate that the teachers from the experimental group benefitted from follow up activities that resulted in full implementation of the SIOP model. These results are consistent with the research on effective professional development that indicates that full implementation of new learning into classroom practices occurs with ongoing coaching and feedback (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1998; Joyce & Showers, 1998; Loucks-Horsley, 1995). The rest of the data triangulation will encompass the work with the experimental group since no additional data was collected from the control group.

**Figure 1. Comparison of SIOP implementation: Treatment v. control group.**



In addition to teachers' self-assessments of their use of the SIOP, the researchers conducted classroom observations in the experimental group on a monthly basis. Researchers utilized observation instruments validated by the SIOP model. Both researchers conducted a sampling of observations and compared results in order to minimize inter rater reliability limitations. The observations targeted individual components of the SIOP month by month. By focusing on parts of the SIOP the researchers were able to gather specific data on the use of the SIOP component as well as provide detailed feedback to teachers and principals on the level of implementation. Based on year long observations researchers concluded that the SIOP was implemented with fidelity by 95% of the teachers in the study. One teacher accounted for the 5% difference. Researchers documented evidence that the teacher was emerging in her implementation of the SIOP and needed to incorporate more student to student interactions in order to be rated as using the SIOP on a daily basis.

The final data collection point on the level of implementation was generated by principals' observations of the use of the SIOP using observation instruments validated by the SIOP model. Principals were asked to observe classrooms at the end of the school year to determine their perceptions of the SIOP implementation in the classroom. Results of the SIOP observation instruments indicated that both principals perceived 100% of the teachers implementing the SIOP on a daily basis.

In order to evaluate the level of use of the SIOP in the classroom this study triangulated three sources of data, teachers' self-assessment of use, researchers' classroom observations, and principals' observations. All three sources of data indicated that teachers in this professional development reach full implementation of the SIOP in the classroom.

### 4.3 Level 3 Organization Support and Change

Organizational support yielded significant insight into teachers' perceptions. A synthesis of the data indicated that active engagement and facilitation of teachers needs by the principal resulted in full implementation of the model in the classrooms. Both teachers and principals responded to organizational support questions and then comparisons were made between the two sets of responses. Researchers found similar responses of activities and evidences that contributed to the success of the professional development. Both principals and teachers agreed that monetary funding and materials to support implementation was necessary and adequate. More importantly, both teachers and administrators commented on the importance of observations by peers and administrators and the usefulness of the specific feedback on the SIOP. In addition, all participants

mentioned the importance of principals' engagement in monthly meetings which helped clarify expectations for teachers and clarified their own administrative role in support of teachers. The active participation helped principals coordinate meeting times, manage challenges, celebrate successes, and encourage peer observations for collaborative learning.

In analyzing teachers and principals perceptions, researchers identified that teachers and principals having the common goal of implementing the SIOP caused an "engaged partnership" where principals were involved and ready to take action to support this professional development. To the researchers the "engaged partnership" was the most important indicator to the successful implementation of the SIOP. Teachers and principals in this professional development "partnered" while learning together. To do so, they allowed themselves a year to try, practice, and learn a new model of instruction and not be formally evaluated in the process. The evaluations to meet contract requirements were still in place, however, did not include the SIOP this year. This freedom to try and learn from practice leveled the expectations and opened communication lines between the teachers and their principal. As the communication lines opened both parties "engaged" in a process of support and feedback to improve instruction devoid of demands from a superior. Many times teachers commented that this process was not "done *to* them" but instead the process was "done *with* them". Teachers felt they had influence over their learning and therefore engaged with principals in instructional conversations centered on classroom implementation of the SIOP. As a result of this study, the researchers witnessed the emergence of a new group of teacher leaders with an increased sense of professionalism and responsibility for educating all learners. They have also exhibited a clearer understanding of their roles as teachers of both academic language and content.

In addition to the above findings, the school/university partnership has resulted in the creation of a network of educators dedicated to the development of academic language proficiency for their ELLs. This motivated group of teachers has continued their own professional growth by acting as teacher leaders in their schools for improved instruction of academic language.

#### 4.4 Level 5 Student Learning Outcomes

As the professional development progressed, a re-occurring discussion ensued among teachers, principals, and the researchers on the measurement of student learning resulting from the implementation of the SIOP. Time and time the conversation ended with the impossibility to directly connect student learning exclusively to the SIOP due to the fact that in addition to the SIOP, teachers were also implementing two other instructional initiatives concurrently. For this reason, questions asked, based on Guskey's model, elicited teachers' perceptions of cognitive and affective student learning outcomes due to the SIOP implementation. Overall, all teachers indicated that their students grades had generally improved from low C's to high B's or low A's. In addition, all teachers commented on the increased engagement of students in their own learning. Students saw learning as fun but more importantly teachers unanimously reported that the retention of learning was noticeably increased. Affectively, students actively engaged in grouping and interactive activities. Teachers commented on the increased motivation to learn in their classrooms.

While this study was initially centered on evaluating a year-long professional development model of instruction to improve instruction for linguistically diverse students, the unintended findings highlight the true success of this project. Classroom observations, interviews, and informal dialogue yielded insight into the process by which teachers adopt new instructional strategies. These unintended findings add to the field of professional development, but more importantly, yield significant implications for school leadership officials to consider in developing school-university partnerships to implement innovations at the school level. These findings and implications will be discussed next.

### 5 Unintended Findings and Implications

The impact of the university partnership was not formally measured; however, all the ongoing and subsequent conversations at the school level reiterate its importance to the success of the program. Through ongoing reflection among all of the stakeholders, it became evident that the consistent ongoing and objective input

from the university faculty was a motivating factor for the continuation of efforts at the local level. It was never the intention of the faculty members to create an electronic newsletter or to “Skype” with our partners, but it became clear to us that the times between our meetings were as important as the times we met face to face. In order to maintain our “virtual presence” we created alternate pathways for communication. This relationship, however, evolved over time and through a concerted effort by all parties.

As a result of this successful partnership, all new consulting and research opportunities are proposed in an entirely different manner. Our new partners must agree to first meet with us and the school leadership along with the district level leader. After a clear understanding is reached as to the goals of our work, the group collaborates and creates a graphic representation of their own timelines, strategies and needs in order for this project to be a success in their schools. Since our time as faculty members and consultants is limited, we no longer can provide monthly follow up for all of the schools who wish it. This has forced the schools and their leaders to take on a more engaged role in facilitating and participating in the newly formed professional learning communities. This new role is not viewed as a burden, but as an opportunity for professional growth. The schools do, however, still receive monthly e-newsletters and an occasional visit from the faculty.

Redefining partnerships as a collegial and lateral effort as opposed to a top down or vertical approach is the keystone to the success of this process. Even though university researchers may have significant expertise, much is to be learned from the daily work and successes of principals and teachers in K-12 schools. Providing opportunities for the classroom teachers to gain the respect and exhibit their professionalism is beneficial to their long-term success and satisfaction in the classroom. All involved became leaders in their field: university partners on facilitating professional learning communities, principals in facilitating learning among their teachers, and teachers became leaders in their school on the SIOP as well as becoming better teachers of academic language and their content.

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