

Effect of Grouping on Language Development of English Learners

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EFFECT OF GROUPING ON LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

A Dissertation

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine if there was a significant difference between first-grade English Learners (EL) who constitute a majority (>50%) of the English language mainstream classroom (homogeneous grouping) and first-grade EL who constitute a minority (<50%) of the English language mainstream classrooms (heterogeneous grouping) in the area of English language acquisition as measured by the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). To accomplish this, the researcher gathered CELDT scores of entire English language mainstream EL who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007 school year and who maintained enrollment in the same district for second grade in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at a Unified School District (USD). In this study, the researcher also determined perceptions of the teachers of the entire English language mainstream EL, who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007 school year and who maintained enrollment in the same district for second grade in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at the USD, on the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in EL. A questionnaire, developed by the researcher, was given to all the English language mainstream first-grade teachers at the USD. A study of teachers' perceptions helped substantiate that the non significant difference in differently grouped EL test scores was not due to the difference in teacher perceptions of EL groupings.

DEDICATION

To my parents, my husband, and my sister who believed in me and made me what I am today. Also, to my daughter Suhani who changed me from an ordinary woman to a mom.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

At the beginning of the last century, educators tried to use the ideal of democracy to fashion a model of education to develop the talents and aptitudes of students that would be personally rewarding in ways to enhance society (Watras, 2004). In the 1960s, the era of social equality, schools were made to pay greater attention to students who were socio-economically disadvantaged (Tanner & Tanner, 1995). It was during this period that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was enacted, which is currently reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Again, during the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act gave the federal government the authority to forbid local boards of education or federal funds unless they racially desegregated schools. This highlighted the importance of equality or equal educational opportunity amongst students (Watras).

In 1974, when the Supreme Court ruled that identical education does not constitute equal education, school districts were directed to take affirmative steps to overcome educational barriers faced by the English Learners (United States Department of Education, 2006). It was ruled by the U.S. Court of Justice that by merely providing English Learners (EL) with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curricula, a school cannot guarantee equality of educational treatment to EL. Emphasis was focused on using research-based programs for effective instruction for EL (United States Department of Education).

In the 1980s, the report “A Nation at Risk” issued by the U.S. Department of Education highlighted the importance of increasing school performance by adopting

research-based programs and curricula (Tanner & Tanner, 1995). In 1986, in his report “What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning,” William J. Bennett, the U.S. Secretary of Education, wrote in the foreword that the aim of the report was to provide the American people with accurate and reliable information about what works in the education of children (Watras, 2004). This further emphasized the importance of adopting research-based curricula and teaching techniques (Watras).

Proposition 227, approved by voters in 1998, promoted the notion of using only English as the medium of instruction to EL to develop their English language, as well as, content knowledge at the given grade level. However, according to Valdez (2001), programs that use only English as a medium of instruction have been unable to provide EL enough access to English as they are not provided with enough support and opportunities to interact with native English speakers. Valdez noted that this restricted EL from having an opportunity to listen and employ English the way native English speakers do. In order to use a limited supply of bilingual and English as Second Language (ESL) teachers efficiently, a school district can end up isolating EL (Crawford, 1997). Often, the percentage of bilingual students in a particular school can be so high as compared to English proficient students that the school is left with no option but to group them altogether (Crawford).

The academic achievement of EL is related to their vocabulary development (Garcia, 1991; Saville-Troike, 1984). When EL are grouped with students with higher levels of proficiency in the English language, they are inclined to develop a better vocabulary (Bikle, 2005). At the same time, factors like exclusionary talk, difficult academic material, and struggle to keep pace with the group makes it extremely difficult

for students with lower levels of English proficiency to participate in group conversations (Bikle).

According to the study done by Durrett and Florence (1971), both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping had a facilitating effect on children's cognitive growth and behavior modification. In their meta-analysis of studies done on homogenous grouping Kulik and Kulik (1982) and Slavin (1987) found that cross-grade homogeneous grouping boosted achievement in elementary school. They also found that homogeneously grouped students of different IQ levels showed similar levels of achievement than when grouped heterogeneously (as cited in Loveless, 1998). In their review of both quantitative and qualitative studies done on grouping by ability at the primary and elementary school levels, Harlen and Malcolm (1999) found that grouping did not necessarily affect student achievement. The Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commission (1999) recommended that educators use "common sense" about grouping (p. 230). The Commission stated that grouping should be used as a tool and an aid to instruction, not an end in itself. Grouping should be used flexibly to ensure that *all* students achieve the necessary learning standards. According to Loveless, the studies that Slavin and the Kuliks reviewed were conducted before 1975. Loveless also added that several structural changes have occurred since that educational phase in grouping students.

This study is expected to add to the area of research because it investigated the effect grouping of EL in the first grade in their language development. The researcher gathered California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores of the entire English language mainstream EL who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007 school year and who maintained enrollment in the same school district for second grade

in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at a DISTRICT¹. The CELDT is administered annually in the fall (California Department of Education, 2006). The first-grade CELDT served as the pretest for this study and the second-grade CELDT served as the posttest.

Based on the reviews of Kulik and Kulik (1982) and Slavin (1987), Allan (1991) suggested the need for considering teacher attitudes and approaches to grouping when determining results. Allan contended that a difference in student test scores in differently grouped classrooms in the studies reviewed may have been as a result of teacher biases or expectations rather than the way students were grouped. Allan, therefore, suggested that considering teacher and parent attitudes towards grouping while studying the effect of grouping on student learning can minimize any emotional effects of grouping.

Harlen and Malcolm (1999) reviewed studies that were carried out since Slavin's review in 1987. According to Harlen and Malcolm, the studies they reviewed did not show any proof that the students taken into consideration in each study, whether heterogeneously or homogeneously grouped, received the same treatment in terms of quality of teaching or teacher expectations. Harlen and Malcolm suggested, as a conclusion from their review of the studies, that the effect of grouping on learning should not come from just comparing the test scores of students in terms of student achievement but from other factors as well. According to Harlen and Malcolm, information about the effect of composition of groups on learning should come from classroom observations and from interviews with students and teachers. The two authors questioned the study methodology used in some of these studies.

In this study, the researcher also determined perceptions of the teachers of entire English language mainstream EL who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007

¹The selected school district will be referred to as DISTRICT.

school year and maintained enrollment in the same district for second grade in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at a DISTRICT on the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in EL. A survey questionnaire was administered to all the English language mainstream first-grade teachers at the DISTRICT. A study of teacher perceptions served to substantiate that any significant difference in differently grouped EL test scores was not due to the difference in their teachers' perceptions of grouping.

Harlen and Malcolm (1999) also postulated that class size, another important variable that affects learning, was not taken into consideration in the studies that have been carried out since Slavin's review in 1986. According to Finn, Pannozzo, Achilles (2004) class sizes affect students' academic performance. The DISTRICT has the policy of maintaining reasonably equal class sizes within each grade level throughout the district by the use of inter-school district transportation. The uniformity of class sizes helped in controlling the effect of class size on EL language development. For more specific results, the scores of Charter Schools, nonsectarian public schools that do not follow many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools (WestEd, 2000) and Special Education Classrooms, classrooms with students with identified learning and physical disabilities (Watson, 2008), were not studied. An English language mainstream classroom is defined as one in which students who are either native English speakers or who have acquired reasonable fluency in English are placed (California Department of Education, 2006). A mixed methodology was used to find any significant effect of grouping on the language development of the EL. The quantitative analysis helped in interpreting the data obtained to determine if there was a significant statistical difference

between EL language development and the type of grouping. The qualitative analysis helped in interpreting the data obtained to determine that the change in the CELDT scores of EL if they occurred due to the corresponding attitudes of their teachers towards grouping. In particular, this researcher through this study sought to determine if there was a significant difference in the English language acquisition between first-grade EL who constitute a majority (>50%) of the English language mainstream classroom (homogeneous grouping) and first-grade EL who constitute a minority (<50%) of the English language mainstream classrooms (heterogeneous grouping) as measured by the CELDT.

Problem Statement

Despite all the efforts made to improve their performance, California schools lag significantly behind other states in terms of student achievement (Loeb, Bryk, & Hanushek, 2007). The problem is that, “even schools doing well overall are not as successful with their EL” (Gandara & Rumberger, 2007, p. 3). The schools show high levels of performance among EL but they still fall behind native English speakers. In the school year 2004-2005, in second grade, only 23% of EL and EL reclassified as fully English proficient scored *proficient* on California Standards Test (Gandara & Rumberger). Not all reclassified fluent-English proficient (RFEP) are included while calculating the proficiency rate on the California Standards Test (CST; California Department of Education, 2006). Only RFEP students who have not yet scored at the proficient level or above on the CST in English Language Arts for 3 years after being reclassified are included (California Department of Education). Twenty-five percent of the students enrolled in California schools are English Learners (Ed-Data, 2008). EL

education is a major concern in California (Jepsen & Alth, 2005). Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), each school's EL population must demonstrate improvement and success in both English proficiency and academic achievement. This has further pushed the importance of increasing the performance of EL (Jepsen & Alth).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined whether there was a significant difference in the English language acquisition between first-grade EL who constitute a majority (>50%) of the English language mainstream classroom (homogeneous grouping) and first-grade EL who constitute a minority (<50%) of the English language mainstream classrooms (heterogeneous grouping) as measured by the CELDT. To determine this, the CELDT scores of entire English language mainstream EL who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007 school year and maintained enrollment in the same district for second grade in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at a USD were used.

In this study, the researcher also determined perceptions of the teachers of entire English language mainstream EL who were enrolled in first grade for the 2006-2007 school year and maintained enrollment in the same district for second grade in the fall of 2007-2008 school year at a USD on the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in EL. The researcher believed that a study of teacher perceptions would help substantiate that any significant difference in differently grouped EL test scores was not due to the difference in teacher perceptions of groupings. A survey questionnaire was given to all the English language mainstream first-grade teachers at the selected school district. Based on their responses, teachers were grouped in one of the six teacher groups: (a) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with more positive attitudes

toward homogeneous grouping, (b) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with more negative attitudes toward homogeneous grouping, and (c) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with no preference for either of the groupings, (d) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with more positive attitudes toward homogeneous grouping, (e) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with more negative attitudes toward heterogeneous grouping, and (f) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with no preference for either of the groupings. Next, the scores of the homogeneously grouped students for each teacher subgroup were compared with heterogeneously grouped EL in the same teacher subgroup. Table 1 illustrates the six data sets that served as the basis for this study. By comparing student scores within each teacher subgroup, the change in proficiency was attributed to the way students were grouped rather than to differences in teacher perceptions on grouping.

Background and Need for the Study

Approximately 3.8 million English Learners² were provided education by the K-12 educational system in the United States in the school year 2003-2004 (Hoffman & Sable, 2006). This comprised 11% of the school-aged population in the U.S. that year. By the year 2030, this percentage of language minority students is expected to increase to 40% of the school-aged population in the U.S. (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Twenty-five percent of the students enrolled in California schools are English Learners (Ed-Data, 2008). EL education is a major concern for the State of California.

² English Learners and EL will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation as appropriate for smooth reading.

Table 1

The Subgroups of English Learners and Teacher Perceptions

CELDT scores of homogeneously grouped EL		
CELDT scores of homogeneously grouped EL with teachers with more positive attitude towards homogeneous grouping.	CELDT scores of homogeneously grouped EL with teachers with more negative attitude towards homogeneous grouping.	CELDT scores of homogeneously grouped EL with teachers with no preferences.
CELDT scores of heterogeneously grouped EL		
CELDT scores of heterogeneously grouped EL with teachers with more positive attitude towards heterogeneous grouping.	CELDT scores of heterogeneously grouped EL with teachers with more negative attitude towards heterogeneous grouping.	CELDT scores of heterogeneously grouped EL with teachers with no preferences.

Note. CELDT = California English Language Development Test, EL = English Learners.

Academic performance of EL is related to their proficiency in English (Garcia, 1991; Saville-Troike, 1984). An important goal of both state and federal policy is to enable EL to become English proficient (De Cos, 1999). A review of the literature revealed that there are several strategies, recommended by research, for teaching EL in order to address their diverse needs. One strategy to improve EL proficiency in English is to provide opportunities for EL to interact with native English speakers. The feedback from native English speakers helps EL modify and speak English better than they would on their own (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Polio & Gass, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Research also reveals that there is a correlation between classroom interactions and improved reading comprehension amongst EL (Echevarria, 1996; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999). Indirect correction of grammatical or syntactical errors during class conversations helps EL in learning grammatically correct English (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Iwashita, 2003; Leeman, 2003).

According to Valdez (2001), programs which use English as a medium of instruction for EL to develop their English language have been unable to provide EL enough access to this support. Again, according to Valdez, EL are not provided with enough opportunities to interact with native English speakers in these programs. In Valdez's opinion, this restricts EL from having an opportunity to listen and employ English the way native English speakers do. At times, using limited supply of bilingual and English as Second Language (ESL) teachers efficiently means that a school district isolates EL (Crawford, 1997). At other times, the percentage of bilingual students in a particular school is so high as compared to English-proficient students that the school is left with no option but to group them altogether (Crawford).

A large number of EL still fall behind on their performance on state tests (Gandara & Rumberger, 2007). With pressure from the federal 2001 NCLB Act to demonstrate improvement and success in both English proficiency and academic achievement amongst EL, schools have to increase the performance of EL (Jepsen & Alth, 2005).

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Sociocultural theory is the theoretical foundation of this study. All humans need a Language Acquisition Support System; that is, the people with whom they interact (Bruner, 1983). Children acquire their first language through interaction with their primary caretakers and others with whom they interact regularly. The contextualized language use of the primary caretakers, while interacting with children and manipulating objects in familiar situations, help children acquire their language skills (Bruner). In classrooms, conceptual understanding develops through interactions among students

(Edwards & Westgate, 1994). When learners interact with knowledgeable others, they get an enriching experience. This drives both language and cognitive development. Language learners when interacting with more knowledgeable peers internalize their strategy of using language to develop their own language (Vygotsky, 1978). The Zone of Proximal Development in the Sociocultural Theory is the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with the support of more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky). In this study, the researcher examined whether there is a significant difference in the English language acquisition between first-grade EL who constitute a majority (>50%) of the English language mainstream classroom (homogeneous grouping) and first-grade EL who constitute a minority (<50%) of the English language mainstream classrooms (heterogeneous grouping).

Research Questions

Using the CELDT scores, two research questions guided this study:

1. What is the change in the proficiency in English of homogeneously grouped English language mainstream first-grade EL, as measured by CELDT (a) when teachers have a positive attitude towards homogeneous grouping of English language mainstream first-grade EL, (b) when teachers have a negative attitude towards homogeneous grouping of English language mainstream first-grade EL, and (c) when teachers do not have a preference for one kind of grouping over the other?
2. What is the change in the proficiency in English of heterogeneously grouped English language mainstream first-grade EL (a) when teachers have a positive attitude towards heterogeneous grouping of English language mainstream first-grade EL, (b) when teachers have a negative attitude towards heterogeneous grouping of English

language mainstream first-grade EL, and (c) when teachers do not have a preference for one kind of grouping over the other?

Null Hypotheses

H₀1: There is no significant difference in the proficiency in English of first-grade EL who constitute a majority (>50%) of the English language mainstream classroom (homogeneously grouped) and first-grade EL who constitute a minority (<50%) of the English language mainstream classrooms (heterogeneous grouped) as measured by CELDT.

H₀2: There is no significant difference in the proficiency in English of homogeneously and heterogeneously grouped first-grade EL in any of the six teacher perception subgroups: (a) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with positive attitude towards homogeneous grouping, (b) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with negative attitude towards homogeneous grouping, (c) teachers of homogeneously grouped EL with no preferences, (d) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with positive attitude towards heterogeneous grouping, (e) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with negative attitude towards heterogeneous grouping, and (f) teachers of heterogeneously grouped EL with no preferences.

Definition of Key Terms

English as a Second Language Program (ESL). The U.S. Department of Education (2005) defines English as a Second Language program as one of technique, methodology, and special curriculum designed to teach EL. This program generally uses English as the medium of instruction with little use of the native language. This program enables EL to achieve English proficiency and academic mastery of subject matter and