

Effective School Leadership Practices Supporting English Language Learners

Ying Ma

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELL), Academic Achievement Gap, Effective School Leadership

Abstract: There is a massive academic achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL, which deserves attention because academic achievement is a powerful predictor of long-term personal success. This article examines the factors influencing ELL's academic performance and the reasons for the gap. As school leaders play an indispensable role in shaping ELL learning outcomes, this paper also summarizes four practices which have been proved to be core elements of effective school leadership and can enhance the services provided to ELL.

1. Introduction

School practices implemented to support an increasing number of English language learners (ELLs) have received much attention. According to the National English Language Exchange Information Center [1], the number of ELLs registered at public K-12 schools more than doubled between 1989-1990 and between 2005-2006. However, ELLs lags far behind non-ELLs in reading and mathematics. Much effort has been made to diminish the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs, where the role of school leaders is an essential factor associated with a productive and successful course for ELLs [2].

Hallinger (2010) combines the conceptualizations of other leading researchers over the past few decades and demonstrates a new school leadership model that implements a wide-angle lens for observing leaders' efforts in school improvement and student learning. However, the leadership practice of Hallinger simulation is limited in support of ELLs.

Distinct from previous researches, this research combines the Prism Model that lists four critical components promoting the ELLs' overall performance, and the practical school leadership model to examine how school leadership could positively affect the learning outcome of ELLs. The combination of the two models will help school leaders perform leadership practice on a theoretical base in order to improve the performance of ELLs [3].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Prism model

A series of studies on the academic achievement of linguistic minorities was conducted by Thomas and Collier during 1982-1996. The study included records of more than 700,000 English-learning students assembled by five participating school systems for over 14 years. After data analysis, researchers found that second language acquisition was just one of the many reasons why ELLs were underperforming [4]. The main reason why ELLs takes a long time to reach the average grade level in the test written in English is that native English speakers do not wait for ELLs to keep pace with them. Thomas and Collier developed the Prism model to fully explain their findings. In this model, students' social and cultural processes, academic development, language development, and cognitive development are intertwined and improve the overall success of ELLs. ELLs need all four components to get the most out of their potential.

1) Social and cultural processes. Thomas and Collier (1997) claimed that the core of a student's language acquisition is all the social and cultural processes surrounding in everyday life. These social and cultural processes happen in the students' past, present and future, and in all situations - families, schools, communities, and the wider society. The teaching environment in schools,

classrooms, or administrative structures creates social and psychological distances between ELLs' and non-ELLs' groups. Community or regional social behaviors, such as prejudice and discrimination expressed to individuals or groups in personal and educational settings, may affect students' performance at school. These factors have a strong influence on students' response to the second language [5]. Only when a social and cultural support environment is provided to ELLs can it have a positive impact on students' learning process.

2) Language development. The linguistic process is the second component of the model, including the mental aspects of language development, as well as the linguistics of the school language, conscious, formal teaching, and the acquisition of a written language system. Children's first language influences both second language learning and academic achievement in several meaningful ways. Most notable is the transfer of academic achievement in native language forms into the second language. To ensure cognitive and academic success in a second language, the student's first language system must be developed at least to a high level of cognition comparable to that of a native English speaker. Thomas and Collier (1997) also suggested that the stronger their mother tongue, the more skilled their second language is. Their findings clearly show that all linguistic minorities have long benefited from L1's advanced academic work. The more children develop their first language in an academical and cognitive way at an age-appropriate level, the more successful they are in academic achievement in the second language at the end of the school year.

3) Academic development. The third component of the model, namely academic development, includes all schools of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. As each grade increases, academic effort greatly extends the vocabulary of the language and brings discourse dimensions to a higher cognitive level. As academic knowledge and concept development can be shifted from the first language to the second language, academic work is most effective through the student's first language, while the second language is taught through meaningful academic content at other school times. Delaying or interrupting academic development may lead to students' academic failure. It is evident that when students have the opportunity to do academic work in their first language, they will have better academic success in their second language in the long run. Therefore, in the U.S., teaching academic content through the student's native language is most effective. In this way, ELLs will not lag behind its native English-speaking peers in academic knowledge.

4) Cognitive development. The last component of this model, the cognitive dimension, is a natural, mental process that evolves from birth to the end of education. It is critical for the cognitive process to be developed, at least in primary school through the child's first language. A large amount of research has shown that children achieving full cognitive development in both languages have a cognitive advantage over monolinguals. In language teaching, many educators simplified language courses as they ignored students' cognitive development. When academic content was added to the language curriculum, it was diluted into cognitively simple tasks, usually under the label "basic skills." Growing research indicates that linguistic, cognitive, and academic development should be addressed equally, through both first and second languages, in order to guarantee students' academic success in the second language.

5) The interdependence of the four components. All four parts - social culture, language, academics, and cognition - are interdependent. If one part is developed at the expense of neglecting another, it may undermine students' overall growth and future success. Academic, cognitive, and linguistic components must be considered growth-related. For children and young adults still experiencing formal schooling, the development of any of these three parts rests heavily with the simultaneous development of the rest two parts through both languages. The sociocultural process, both positively and negatively, strongly influences students' opportunities for cognitive, academic, and language development. It is vital that school leaders create a socially and culturally supportive school environment where students' natural language, academic and cognitive development can thrive in both first language and second language.

2.2. Effective practices supporting ELLs

1) Setting goals. In theory, setting goals explains the most substantial proportion of leadership effects and aims to focus on the individual and collective work of the school or school district employees. The practice of successfully building a vision is one of the primary sources of motivation and inspiration for employees. A more specific method in this category is to create a shared vision that promotes the acceptance of team goals and demonstrates high-performance expectations. Effective school leaders can focus on English language development and ELL achievements throughout the school. They will set a clearly defined school-wide achievement goal for the ELLs. Creating clear focus, goals, and direction is key to supporting ELLs' successful practices (Leithwood et al., 2008).

2) Developing people. The practice of cultivating talent explains the second significant change in leadership. The primary purpose of this approach is not only to build the knowledge and skills that teachers and other staff need to achieve organizational goals but also to establish a tendency to adhere to the application of knowledge and skills. A more specific approach in this category is to provide personalized support and considerations, promote intellectual stimulation, and provide appropriate models. Recent research has shown that developing talent is the key to how successful leaders integrate functions and individuals. Supportive school leaders focus on and correct the traditional marginalization of specific students and clearly understand how career development supports school reform. These beliefs and knowledge will equip school leaders with the skills to assist them in learning new roles in ELLs teaching.

3) Redesigning the organization. Social and cultural processes play an essential role in the long-term performance of ELL. Effective school leaders have created a supportive learning environment for ELL to develop their academic and language skills. According to McGee et al. (2015), the structure and systems surrounding ESOL teaching and learning support greater collaboration and teamwork. School-specific ELLs focuses on building cultural knowledge and working with family and communities. Teachers, teaching assistants, leaders, and the community are encouraged to participate in the school's cultural and language experience. These are designed to expand the cultural knowledge of teachers and work with the community to ultimately support and motivate English learners.

4) Managing the instructional program. Effective school leaders aiming to serve ELLs better emphasize the importance of continuous, ongoing language support services at all grade levels. Efforts to develop language skills should be "early, continuous, and intensive" and should include sufficient opportunities for oral English development (August & Shanahan, 2006). Adaptive courses and assessments, especially ELL, are also crucial. ELL is completing two simultaneous tasks: they are learning mainstream courses while learning the language of instruction. Therefore, the distinction of the ELL program must take into account the unique needs of this group of learners. Appropriate adjustments to the instructional program should be made, such as modifying some or all of the subject expectations to make the goal challenging, but achievable at ELL's current level of English.

3. Conclusion

ELLs are often excluded from mainstream education because they are culturally and linguistically minority. The problem with ELL is not only that their first language is not English, but also the lack of public attention and appropriate curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Thomas and Collier found that the stronger their mother tongue, the more skilled their second language is. Besides, academic understanding shifts from one language to another. Teaching academic content through the student's native language is most effective. Finally, cognitive development develops through interaction with family and friends in the mother tongue. Of particular importance is that at least through primary school, cognitive development of children's mother tongues still exists.

In order to benefit ELLs, school leaders should set a precisely defined school-wide achievement

goal for ELLs to cause widespread concern about ELLs. Also, effective school leaders seek to provide teachers with opportunities to develop professional learning about ELL teaching and learning. Also, school leaders should focus on how to create a supportive environment for ELLs and promote a collaborative environment for all stakeholders to communicate. Finally, ELL's teaching plans should be consistent, and meaningful courses should include a higher level of thinking and build on sound theory and best practices.

In short, educators must emphasize ELLs' first language learning and provide a socio-cultural friendly school environment that enables students' natural language, academic, and cognitive development succeed in both first and second language. Effective school leaders also need to understand the misconceptions about ELL learning and use data-driven research to serve ELLs better.

References

- [1] August, D., & Shanahan, T. Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the national literacy panel on language minority children and youth. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.
- [2] Hallinger, P. Leadership for learning: lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49 (2), 125 – 142, 2011
- [3] Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 2008, 28 (1), 27-42.
- [4] McGee A, Haworth P, MacIntyre, L. Leadership practices to support teaching and learning for English language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 2015, 49 (1) 92-114.
- [5] Thomas W P, Collier V P. School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students. Washington, D.C: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. Report presented at the California Association for Bilingual Education Conference, San Diego, 1997.