Teaching the Academic Language and Concepts of Language Arts to Secondary Long-Term English Learners

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Abstract

While the majority of English language learners are found in elementary schools, an alarming number of these students are entering secondary schools. These secondary students are long-term English learners, students who have been in U.S. schools for seven years or longer. Long-term English learners struggle with academic success, and educators need to find ways to support them. In this article, the effects of teaching academic vocabulary and concepts to 10th grade Hispanic long-term English learners in a language arts class at a large, South Texas high school were explored. The data collection included student documents, classroom observations, and interviews. The article explains that although teaching the academic vocabulary and concepts of language arts was somewhat effective in helping long-term English learners be successful in their English language arts class, these students still need a great amount of scaffolding and monitoring combined with additional time to be consistently successful.

*Keywords:* English language learners, long-term English learners, academic language, language arts, secondary schools
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“When I have to do an assignment I am suffering, because I don’t have idea what some academic words means, it is an extend vocabulary that I don’t know exist.”

These are the words of Natasha (all names are pseudonyms), a high school English learner (EL) who was asked to write about the academic challenges she faces each day. She is obviously quite frustrated and is struggling with her academic coursework. In the last few years, there has been a focus on ELs in elementary schools, but more attention needs to be directed towards older ELs like Natasha because an alarming number of ELs are now entering and failing in secondary schools (Olsen, 2010b).

While there are high school ELs who are new immigrants, the majority of older ELs have been in U.S. schools for several years and have received services as second language students (Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Menken & Kleyn, 2009). Those students who have been in the school system for seven or more years and still struggle with their academic coursework are classified as long-term ELs (LTELs). LTELS are the largest group of older English learners and, until recently, have been the least understood and least studied (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2010). In New York City, one third of English learners in secondary schools are long-term English learners (Menken & Kleyn, 2010), and in California, a larger percent, 59%, have been identified as LTELs (Olsen, 2010a, 2010b). A focus on the development of academic language may be the key to improving their academic performance (Cummins, 1981, 2008).
Long-Term English Language Learners

According to Freeman and Freeman (2002, 2009), long-term ELs are not academically successful and are often below grade level in reading, writing, and math. Olsen (2010b) found that many long-term ELs are frustrated and at the point of giving up as early as fifth grade. In their early years of schooling, these students have generally not received first language support through bilingual education, they have been in poorly implemented language development programs, they have been mainstreamed with no instructional support at all, or they “have experienced a ‘ping pong’ pattern of placement in one kind of program for a period of time, then into another kind of program and back again” (Olsen, 2010a, p. 32).

By high school, LTELEs have developed habits of non-engagement. The curriculum they have experienced has not been culturally responsive and has often been incomprehensible (Diego, 2013). In some cases, LTELEs are placed in classes that do not give them graduation credit. In these classes, they are assigned very simple work to do, such as coloring pictures or filling out worksheets (Valdés, 2001). As a result long-term ELs feel they are failures and do not see themselves as belonging in school. They have learned to be passive and invisible in school, especially in classroom settings. The majority want to go to college but are unaware that their “academic skills, academic record, and the courses they have taken have not prepared them to reach their goal” (Olsen, 2010b, p.2).

Most secondary programs for ELs are designed for newcomers where students are placed in a sequence of classes depending on their English proficiency level (Olsen, 2010a, 2010b). Long-term ELs, whose oral English is native-like, stay in the intermediate
or advanced level English as a second language (ESL) classes because they continue to be unsuccessful on their written English proficiency exams. These long-term ELs may remain in these classes for years even though the classes do not meet their unique needs (Olsen, 2010b). An alternative scenario for long-term ELs is that they are reclassified based on their oral proficiency and placed in mainstream classes where they are not prepared to compete academically with native English speakers (Menken & Kleyn, 2012).

Adolescent ELs in secondary schools face the challenge of learning academic subject matter and learning the academic registers of English. These students face a number of challenges that are “local and global in nature, as they negotiate the linguistic academic and social world of schooling” (Walqui, 2006, p. 159). As Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) report, adolescent ELs face double the work of native English speakers because they have to learn both subject matter content and English.

**Factors that Lead to Low Achievement for Long-Term ELs**

Gándara and Contreras (2009) present several reasons why language minority groups, including long-term ELs, struggle academically. ELs are often segregated into schools where most students do not speak English as their native language. When students do not have role models who speak English, it is more difficult for them to learn the language.

Where students live and go to school makes a difference in school success as well (García et al., 2004). Inequities in housing policies are a “vicious cycle that traps families into intergenerational inequality because housing is so closely connected to quality of schools and quality of schooling is so closely connected to future economic opportunity”
(Gándara & Contreras, p.313). Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova (2008) found that ELs often attend the worst schools, schools that are “deprived of resources and plagued by conflict” (p. 228). In these schools, language minority students reported the least academic success. In addition, many ELs are raised in communities that do not offer adequate health care. A child’s physical and emotional health can affect student achievement. If students are not mentally or physically well, it is difficult for them to focus at school. Often, they miss school and fall behind their peers (Gándara and Contreras, 2009).

Gándara and Contreras (2009) believe that the single most critical resource in any school is the teacher. Many teachers are not prepared to work with language minority students. These teachers do not have the support, or strategies necessary to meet the needs of these students (Olsen, 2010). As the number of ELs has increased, the number of teachers trained in second language acquisition pedagogy has declined. Data from the 2002 National Center for Education Statistics shows that 41% of teachers have ELs in their classes, yet fewer than 13% of those teachers have had 8 or more hours of training in second language pedagogy. A 2006 report showed that more than 40% of teachers of English learners had received only in-service workshops that focused on serving ELs in the last five years (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Benavídez, 2007).

**Educational Needs and Practices for Long-Term English Learners**

Long-term ELs have specific characteristics that require educators to understand who they are and what they need. While long-term ELs have oral language proficiency in both their native language and in English, they have limited literacy skills in English and their native language (Menken and Kleyn, 2009, 2010). This lack of literacy, along with
all the other causes for failure listed above, produces students who find themselves falling progressively behind as they move from one grade to the next. At each grade level there is an increased demand for content area literacy. Yet, few teachers understand how to teach their subject area content, make the curriculum culturally responsive, and, at the same time, support the increasing language needs of their students.

After conducting case studies with long-term ELs, Menken et al. (2009) recommended that high school teachers should be prepared to teach long-term ELs the academic literacy skills they need. These students need specific literacy skills instruction in each subject matter course. For example, in English language arts classes, students need to be taught the specific language of story elements such as protagonist, antagonist, and setting. They need to understand how to organize an essay or a summary.

Menken and Kleyn (2009, 2010) propose that long-term ELs should not be placed into ESL courses but rather into English language arts courses that provide a culturally relevant curriculum and focus on increasing students’ academic literacy skills in English. The researchers noted that in successful schools, teachers in areas such as math, science, and social studies addressed literacy in their instruction. However, in most schools, the primary responsibility for the development of academic literacy still rests with the English language arts teacher.

**Teaching ELs in English Language Arts**

To extend the work of Menken and her colleagues, I conducted a study designed to identify best practices for teaching long-term English learners. I was specifically interested in exploring how the use of specific strategies to support the development of
academic concepts and vocabulary in an English language arts classroom impacts the academic achievement of long-term ELs.

Setting of the Study

The district where the study was conducted is located along the Texas/Mexico border. It is a high poverty district with 96% of the students identified as economically disadvantaged, 59% at risk, and 30% as limited English proficient. The district has a transitional bilingual program for English learners and provides some ESL services. Programs are implemented according to the discretion of school principals, and this practice often results in English only instruction. Students, then, may receive a limited amount of first language support in early grades, but at best, experience a poorly developed bilingual or language development program at the middle school and high school levels.

The high school English language arts classroom where this study took place is located in a large South Texas high school with a total school population of approximately 3,200 students in grades 9-12. Ninety-five percent of the students are Hispanic and 7 percent of the students at the school are identified as English learners. Although some of the long-term ELs at the school are still classified as second language learners and receive some services, the majority have been mainstreamed and no longer qualify for ESL support. Many of the students in the English II class that was the site for the study were no longer classified as ELs but had the characteristics of long-term English learners. They had been in school seven or more years and spoke both English and Spanish, but struggled with reading and writing in English.
Participants

The subjects for this study were six high school sophomores enrolled in the English II language arts class taught by a cooperating teacher who worked with me during the study. The students were identified as having the characteristics of long-term ELs by a survey as well as by follow up interview questions. The study participants took part in all the activities that their classmates did, and I followed their progress throughout my study.

The cooperating teacher and I planned lessons together on a regular basis. She was a collaborator, though not a co-researcher, on this project. We worked together to plan specific strategies for teaching academic vocabulary using different pedagogical structures. Rink, French, Lee, Solomon, and Lynn (1994) explain that pedagogical structures are techniques used to organize classroom instruction. The pedagogical structures the cooperating teacher of this study used included teacher modeling, guided discussion, group work, partner work, and independent work. The lessons were based on the English Language State Standards and the strategies applied came from the research of Short and Fitzsimmons (2007), Freeman and Freeman (2009), Meltzer and Hamann (2005), and Gibbons (2009).

Lesson Plans

The cooperating teacher and I worked together to design lesson plans that specifically engaged students in the academic language of language arts with a focus on the academic vocabulary and concepts that are included on the state language arts standardized exam. Each lesson plan included the pedagogical structures that would be used. We focused on how the instructor would integrate the four language modes, how
she would teach the reading and writing process, how she would implement reading comprehension strategies, how she would assist students with vocabulary development, how she would draw on and build students’ background knowledge, and how she would teach language through content (Freeman and Freeman, 2009). Three lessons were taught each week over a six-week period. Lessons lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

Together, the cooperating teacher and I decided that the major theme for the lessons would be the power of the individual. We wanted to have the opportunity to expose the students to the idea that they, as individuals, have the power to make a positive difference in the world. We chose several articles and short stories from a collection of stories, *Finding Our Way* (Saldaña, 2003), a culturally relevant book for our Latino students that we hoped would engage them in learning. We created activities designed to help students develop academic concepts and academic language as they engaged in reading the short stories and articles.

In addition, we devised specific assignments that would help the students succeed on the up-coming English language arts standardized state exam. These assignments were related to themes that emerged from the short stories and articles. We specifically designed those assignments around the personal narrative and multiple-choice sections of the state exam. These were the sections that students had typically scored low on in the past. Each assignment included important academic vocabulary and concepts, and a variety of the pedagogical structures described above were embedded in the assignments.
Researcher's Journal

In order to keep notes on the 21 lessons that I observed, I kept a researcher’s journal. I recorded information about whether the lesson plans were implemented as planned as well as what type of pedagogical structures were used.

Interviews

I also conducted an interview with each of the six students after each of the 21 lessons in order to check their understanding of the academic concepts and vocabulary and to elicit their opinions on the effectiveness of the different pedagogical structures that were used during the lesson. I interviewed the students immediately after the assignments as often as possible.

A total of 58 student interviews were conducted. It is important to note that not all students participated in all of the assignments. In some cases, students were absent and missed the assignment. In other cases, the students were in class but did not turn in their work. Students seldom shared why they did not do their work. When they did, they gave different reasons they did not turn in their work. In some cases, students did not have time to finish. In others, they did not understand the concepts enough to successfully complete the work. In still other cases, students’ personal lives kept them from doing their assignments.

For each student interview, I asked two questions:

1. In today’s assignment, you reviewed (academic vocabulary or concept that was reviewed was inserted here). In your own words, what do you understand about this?

2. In today’s assignment, the teacher used (pedagogical structure or pedagogical structures that students participated in were listed here). How did this help you or not
help you to understand (academic concepts and vocabulary from the assignment listed here).

The interviews were designed to gain information about students’ perceptions. I wanted to know what the students understood about the academic vocabulary that was the focus of the assignment. In addition, I wanted to know their perceptions of the pedagogical structure or pedagogical structures that were used. I specifically wanted to know if they felt that the pedagogical structure(s) helped them or did not help them to understand the academic concepts and vocabulary.

**Document Review**

To facilitate the analysis of the data, I created a document review chart in order to have a record of each assignment and how student work reflected or did not reflect understanding of the academic concepts and vocabulary that were taught. The chart included a description of each assignment, the academic concepts and vocabulary that were the focus of the assignment, the pedagogical structure or pedagogical structures that were used, as well as whether or not the students were successful with the assignment. I was able to determine this by looking over each student’s assignment and noting whether they were able to complete it successfully, somewhat successfully, or not at all as rated on the rubrics that I created for each assignment. Table 1 gives a summary of all the data collected for the study.

(Insert Table 1 here)

There were 21 lessons evaluated. For the purpose of this article, I describe in detail below how each lesson was analyzed taking one lesson as an example.
Lesson Example

In the personal narrative lesson, students were asked to read five well-written personal narrative short stories from *Finding Our Way* (Saldaña, 2003). The short stories all presented examples of the influence or impact people had on one another. This lesson connected to the students’ lives and experiences since they have experienced influence and impact in ways similar to those described in the book. The assignment began with the teacher modeling what she wanted the students to do. As a class, they worked together to read a personal narrative essay and then answer questions relating to the topic of the essays, influence and impact. That is, in these readings a character was influenced or impacted by another character or an event. After the teacher modeled the assignment, students worked in groups to read several short stories and answer questions about how they reflected influence and impact. By answering the questions, students showed their understanding of the concepts and the academic vocabulary influence and impact. Table 2 shows how students were evaluated for this assignment. In the case of this lesson, since students worked in groups, they were given a group grade for the assignment.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Table 3 describes the assignment, which academic concepts and vocabulary were the focus of the assignment, and how many students were successful with the assignment. According to the rubric for this assignment, all students were successful. Below, interview results from all six students showed the success of these pedagogical structures for teaching the concepts of influence and impact.

(Insert Table 3 here)
**Alejandro.** Through his answers about the readings, Alejandro showed that he understood how each story focused on *influence or impact*. For example, when asked about one of the short stories from *Finding Our Way* (Saldaña, 2003), “Who was influenced by whom?” Alejandro responded appropriately “Jennifer was influenced by Joe.” Then in a follow up question he was asked, “In what way did he/she influence the other person?” Alejandro answered, “Joe made her do drugs.” When interviewed about the assignment, Alejandro was asked to describe *influence* and *impact* in his own words. He explained, “*Influence* is when someone affects you in some way. *Impact* is the same idea but it seems stronger.”

**Josue.** When asked about the same story “Who was influenced by whom?” Josue correctly answered, “Jennifer Mary Scott by Joe McMalin.” in his answer to the next question, “In what way did he/she influence the other person?” he again responded correctly, “Inviting to Jennifer go to the party and make her do drugs.” When asked to explain in his own words what he understood about *influence* and *impact*, Josue answered, “The words are almost the same as Spanish so they are easy for me to understand. It’s when someone does something that you don’t forget because it changes you.”

**Abdiel.** For the same story, Abdiel responded, “Joe influenced Jen.” In the follow up question, “In what way did he/she influence the other person?” He correctly answered, “Using drugs.” When asked what he understood about the academic vocabulary and concepts from this assignment he answered, “They mean that when someone does something and that in some way affects you.”
David. When David was asked, “Who was influenced by whom?” about the same story Alejandro, Josue, and Abiel had responded to, he also responded, “Jennifer was influenced by Joe.” In a follow up question, “In what way did he/she influence the other person?” David wrote, “Joe influenced Jennifer with drugs.” When asked to define influence and impact during his interview, David said, “I understand that it is when someone changes your life.”

Silvia. Silvia answered all of the questions correctly about another of the Saldaña short stories. For example, when asked, “Who impacted whom?” She responded correctly, “Lynette impacted Christian’s life.” In a follow up question, “In what way?” She answered, “Lynette got Christian onto the right path by changing his attitude of school.” When asked to describe influence and impact during her interview, Silvia responded, “I already understood those words but now I know I can use them in an essay.”

Roman. Roman answered the questions correctly about a third Saldaña story. When asked, “Who was influenced by whom in one question, he correctly answered, “Ricardo was influenced by Roberto.” In the follow up question, “In what way did he/she influence the other person?” He answered, “Roberto influenced Ricardo by helping him to leave the drugs.” When asked what he understood about the academic vocabulary and concepts from the assignment, he responded, “Those words are about someone changing the direction of your life. It could be good or bad but in this essay, it was supposed to be in a good way.”

Overall, the students were all able to successfully explain the concepts of influence and impact. In addition, Josue was able to draw on the Spanish cognates of the
words. Silvia was able to deepen her understanding of the concepts through participating in this lesson and now felt ready to use the words in her own writing.

**Other observations.** Sometimes long-term English learners in the study were able to explain the academic vocabulary and concepts in the interviews but were not able to complete their assignments successfully. For example, in a lesson on figurative language, Alejandro was not able to correctly identify the figurative language in a song. When asked to explain figurative language during the interview, Alejandro explained, “I know all of them like a *simile* is comparing two things and a *hyperbole* is an exaggeration.”

In another lesson, students were asked to identify the meanings of several common idioms. Roman was unsuccessful with the lesson but when asked in the interview to explain what an idiom is, he responded, “*Idioms* are expressions you say but you don’t mean what you say literally.” Like Alejandro’s response in the figurative language in a song lesson, he understood the concept but was not successful on the assignment.

Often, the LTELs were able to explain the academic vocabulary and concepts orally. This is consistent with Cummins’ (1984) findings that ELs develop conversational English proficiency before academic language proficiency. Long-term ELs have conversational proficiency but are behind in reading and writing (Freeman & Freeman, 2009). For this reason, teachers should consider offering alternative assessments so that students can show in other ways that they do understand the academic vocabulary and concepts (Tannenbaum, 1996). For example, students could give an oral presentation or do a skit. These alternate assignments would give students the opportunity to show that
they do understand the academic vocabulary and concepts.

Another key factor that affected student success for the long-term English learners in the study was time. For example, on a quiz on a short story, students were reviewing story elements and chronological order. Alejandro commented that he did not have enough time to finish the assignment, “It was ok but I was checking in the book as I was doing the assignment and it took me a while.” Researchers including Freeman and Freeman (2009) argue that ELs need extra time on assignments. They explain that other modifications such as Spanish/English dictionaries and graphic organizers will not be effective for ELs if they are not also provided additional time. When ELs are given time, they can be successful with the assignments.

Findings

Several conclusions emerged from this study. Below, I present findings related to the students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of the different pedagogical structures, including teacher modeling, guided discussion, group work, partner work, and independent work, in helping them understand the academic concepts and vocabulary. Then, I draw conclusions based on how the students’ work reflected their understanding of academic concepts and vocabulary that they were taught.

Teacher Modeling

Five assignments that were included in this study of long-term English learners included teacher modeling. Teacher modeling was often used along with other pedagogical structures such as group work, partner work, and independent work. For example, in one lesson, the cooperating teacher began by modeling for the students how to write an outline for an argumentative essay. As she modeled, she had students provide
input. After modeling, she had students work independently to write their own argumentative essay outline.

In another lesson, students were given the lyrics of a song and asked to identify the figurative language in the song. The teacher first modeled how the students would identify the figurative language in the beginning of the song and then asked them to work with a partner to identify the figurative language in the remainder of the song.

Overall, students’ perceptions of teacher modeling were positive. For the five teacher modeling assignments that students participated in, 10 comments were made about this structure during the interviews. Of these, eight were rated as positive and two were rated as negative. What seemed to work about this pedagogical structure is that although the cooperating teacher was the one modeling, she had the students participate and provide input as she went along. For one modeling assignment, the cooperating teacher had the students work with her to create an outline for an essay. As Silvia commented, “The way the teacher showed us how to do the outline was easy because she had us help her and that made me really think about what I was learning.” After that same lesson, Alejandro stated, “When she wrote the outline in front of the class, I took notes and participated as she was asking questions. When I had to do it by myself, I already knew what to do.”

On the other hand, if the assignment focused on concepts or vocabulary the students did not understand and students were not involved in the modeling activity, the modeling did not always help them. Two comments made by students about teacher modeling were negative. When Alejandro was asked to identify the figurative language in a song on his own, he was unsuccessful with the assignment. When asked to explain in
his own words what he understood about figurative language, he said, “I got confused and I thought they were all similes and I couldn’t figure out the other ones.” He did not directly answer the question, it was clear that he was confused about figurative language, and teacher modeling did not help him.

Roman, another participant, did not remember the different types of figurative language. Although the cooperating teacher showed them what to do, this student was not successful with the assignment. He explained that he liked that the teacher modeled what they were going to do, but once he began working on the assignment, he had a difficult time since he was not comfortable with the academic vocabulary for that assignment. Since he struggled with the academic vocabulary, he was not successful with the lesson, even though the cooperating teacher had modeled what the students were going to do.

Overall, teacher modeling worked for certain types of assignments, but when the teacher did not review academic concepts and vocabulary that the students were still not familiar with, and when the teacher did not involve the students, the modeling was less effective in helping them to complete the assignments successfully.

**Guided Discussions**

The LTELs in the study participated in six assignments that included guided discussion. The cooperating teacher used guided discussion in her English II classroom in order to engage students in a discussion about the assignment. She often included the academic concepts and vocabulary from the assignment as part of the discussion, so that students would begin to recognize the terms and produce them when they spoke. Overall, the ten comments that study students made about guided discussion were all positive.
What students seemed to especially like about guided discussions was that they were able to get ideas from each other. In one lesson, students had a guided discussion about a story from the Saldaña collection. After the discussion, they were asked to find textual evidence from the chapter to answer questions. Alejandro explained that the discussion helped him understand what was happening in the chapter. He was then successful with the lesson. When answering a question from the chapter “Why does Kiko feel better?” He correctly answered, “Kiko feels better because he knows his friends will back him up.” He goes on to provide evidence from the story, “Kiko knew he would be ok because behind the mochos, leaning up against the wall of the gym, were Trompo, Ramon, and the other vatos who would stand by him through anything.” Alejandro was also able to explain textual evidence, the academic vocabulary for the lesson, “It is the part of the story that you copy down to prove what you are saying is true.”

Abdiel, another student who participated in the study, was also positive about guided discussion. The class had a discussion about common idioms. After the discussion, students were asked to pick one idiom, draw a picture of the literal meaning, and then write an explanation of the expression. After the class discussion, Abdiel commented, “The discussion helped me understand idioms, and then I knew how to do the idiom project.” Abdiel was successful with this assignment. He chose the idiom, “Elvis has left the building.” He drew a picture of a crowd of people outside of a building cheering for Elvis and a car (we assume that Elvis is in the car) leaving. He explained, “my picture is Elvis leaving a building. That’s what it literally is but the expression is that the show is over.” When asked to explain what an idiom was, Abdiel responded, “An idiom is when you say something you don’t mean exactly, it’s an expression.”
Not only did students make positive comments about guided discussions, they also felt they were useful since academic concepts and vocabulary were often reviewed throughout the discussions. Therefore, guided discussions were well liked by the students and helped them build academic vocabulary and concepts.

**Group Work**

When students work in groups, there needs to be positive interdependence. That is, students need to work towards a common goal and realize that they need each other to accomplish that goal (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). In his meta-analysis of studies on cooperative learning, Marzano (2001) concluded that organizing students into cooperative learning groups has a positive effect on learning.

Four of the assignments the long-term learners participated in included group work. The cooperating teacher put students into groups of three in order to give them the opportunity to work together on assignments. Students were grouped in different ways. Generally, students chose their own groups or were asked to get into groups with students who sat close to them. However, students were not taught how to develop effective cooperative learning skills. Johnson and Johnson (1999) argue that in order for students to develop these skills, teachers must plan for as well as organize group work carefully.

Of the sixteen comments that were made about group work, nine were positive and seven were negative. Positive comments came from groups that had positive group interdependence. For example, one student liked working in a group because group members gave each other ideas. One study participant, Silvia, stated that the group work was helpful because all of the group members helped each other to complete the assignment.
Negative comments were often made when students did not know how to do the assignment, or they felt their group members either did not know how to do the assignment or did not want to participate in the assignment. In another case, Alejandro did know how to do the assignment, and the other group members did not know. He was frustrated and commented that he did not find the group work helpful since he was the only person in the group who understood how to do the assignment.

**Partner Work**

Both group and partner work were only effective under certain conditions for the LTELs in the study. Students participated in three assignments that included partner work. The cooperating teacher had students work with partners to complete assignments that focused on academic concepts and vocabulary. For the most part, students chose their own partner or were asked to work with the person sitting next to them. Of the seven comments made about partner work, six were negative and one was positive.

In many cases, students were negative about partner work when they did not know how to do the assignment, and their partner did not know either. Other times, students commented that they did not feel like doing the work, and their partner was equally unmotivated. This seemed to happen when students did not have an understanding of the academic vocabulary or concepts.

For example, Josue, one of the study participants, did not feel that working with a partner was helpful. In an assignment about tone in literature, neither Josue nor his partner understood the academic vocabulary or concepts the teacher was reviewing. For the assignment, students were asked to identify the tone of several paragraphs by using a list of tone words they had reviewed throughout the year. When asked about how
working with a partner helped or did not help him to understand tone, Josue said, “My partner did not know how to do it, and I really didn’t understand the tone words we had to pick from.”

One comment about partner work was positive. A study participant, Silvia, worked with a partner to practice writing topic sentences for an argumentative essay. When asked about working with her partner she stated, “It was good because we were giving each other ideas.” It was clear that both Silvia and her partner were motivated to complete the assignment and understood the academic concepts. For these reasons, they were able to be successful with the assignment.

While many studies have shown the benefits of cooperative learning groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, Marzano, 2001), in the case of ELs, it is essential that they have a clear understanding of the academic vocabulary and concepts, the task at hand, and have a high enough level of English proficiency to complete the task.

**Independent Work**

Overall, the long-term English learners in the study perceived independent work negatively when they were working with academic concepts and vocabulary they were not familiar with. According to their comments, they would have felt more positive if they had had the opportunity to review the academic concepts or vocabulary before working independently. They also felt that having a partner to talk through the assignments with them would have given them a more positive outlook. This comment was interesting, since in general, students had negative perceptions about partner work.

Students participated in nine assignments in which they were asked to work independently. Of the comments that were made about independent work, thirteen were
positive, eight were negative, and two were mixed. When the assignment included academic concepts and vocabulary that the students understood, they had positive perceptions.

Silvia commented that one independent assignment was easy since she had done the reading ahead of time and felt prepared to complete the work. On the other hand, Josue commented that he had not done the reading and, therefore, could not answer the questions on the assignment.

When responding to the interview question about independent work, Silvia commented, “It was ok. I knew how to do it, and the teacher helped me when I had questions.” When they had not developed a good understanding of the academic concepts or vocabulary, they either had mixed or negative responses. Alejandro stated, “It was ok because I know the idioms but maybe with a partner I could have checked my answers.” Another student said, “It did not help me. If we could have reviewed the words first or been able to help each other, it would have been better.”

Teachers can give students the opportunity to be successful on independent assignments by making sure they have the necessary information before giving them the assignment. For example, if students were not able to read ahead of time, teachers could give them time in class to read or engage students in a jigsaw activity where the reading is divided up into parts and different students are responsible for only one part to report back to others (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). These kinds of activities set the students up for success rather than failure.
**Recommendations for Supporting Long-term ELs in the Classroom**

Several suggestions for classroom practice with LTELs emerge from this study. Teachers should carefully consider their level of support during instruction, in order to provide a gradual transfer of control for their students. Teacher modeling should also include student participation and teacher monitoring. Students should not be given group, partner, or independent work unless they are have been well prepared for it ahead of time. A gradual release model of instruction provides each of these elements for long-term ELs.

**Use a Gradual Release Model for Instruction**

Fisher and Frey’s (2009) gradual release model is ideal for ELs. The teacher models, then uses guided discussion and interacts with the whole class. Then, the students work together in small groups or with partners as the teacher closely monitors their work. Finally, the students work independently.

In the case of long-term ELs, it is essential that a model like this one be used and that the release only occur when students have a strong grasp of the academic vocabulary and concepts that are being taught. Throughout the study, there were many times that after teacher modeling, students were put directly into groups or asked to work independently. Often, the LTELs in the study were not yet comfortable enough with the academic vocabulary and concepts to be successful with assignments. LTELs need multiple opportunities for guided practice before they are ready to work independently. Therefore, teachers should be aware of their students’ understanding levels and plan lessons accordingly.
Teacher Modeling Should Include Student Participation and Be Followed by Teacher Monitoring

The long-term English learners in this study had overall positive perceptions about teacher modeling. Marzano (2001) writes that “learning a complex skill mandates that a person properly demonstrates the skill” (p. 156). Students commented that they liked it when the cooperating teacher had them participate as she modeled. Teachers should do this any time they are modeling because, as Silvia commented, “The way she showed us how to do the outline was easy because she had us help her and made me really think about what I was learning.”

Once they have modeled, teachers need to actively monitor LTELs as they work either with groups, partners, or independently. Monitoring can be done by walking around and engaging in conversations with the students about how they are doing on the assignment. Johnson and Johnson (1999) explain that the most effective ways that a teacher can influence the interaction of group members “are in the instruction provided before group interaction and in the monitoring of group interactions” (p.244).

As teachers monitor, they can have the students show them what they are working on so that they can assess whether or not the students are on the right track. If the students are not on the right track, the teacher can intervene and work with those students.

Monitoring also helps with LTELs who are not motivated to work. In most cases, when students know that the teacher is walking around and will be checking their progress, they will be more likely to participate in the class work.
One of the biggest advantages of monitoring the students is that it gives teachers valuable information about students. They have the opportunity to see students’ strengths as well as areas of need. This information can be used to determine what long-term English learners already know and what they need to know in order to be successful with future assignments. Teachers can also use the information to create future assignments.

**LTELs Need to Be Well Prepared for Group and Partner Work**

According to several researchers, English learners who have the opportunity to work together in groups or pairs are more likely to be successful (Freeman & Freeman, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Marzano, 2001). For example, Marzano found that cooperative learning had an effect size of .78 when it was compared with instructional strategies in which students worked on tasks individually. Frey and Fisher (2009) argue that students should be provided the opportunity to work with one another as they clarify their understanding of the task at hand. However, the student responses in this study showed that group or pair work alone is not enough. There needs to be a great deal of scaffolding for group work to be effective. When teachers have LTELs work together, they need to help them develop the necessary skills to carry out their tasks. For this to happen, the teacher must plan and organize group work carefully.

When organizing groups, there are many factors that teachers should consider. To begin, the teacher should determine whether or not groups should be organized by ability level. Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, and D’Apollonia (1996) found that students of low ability placed in homogeneous groups performed worse than low ability students in heterogeneous groups. Since all the students in this study were LTELs, they could not help one another.
Fisher and Frey (2009), in discussing a powerful feedback system for all learners suggest that students first need “feed up” which is a clear goal to focus on a task. They, then suggest teachers need to provide feedback so that students know where they are. If students are not doing well, teachers need to modify their instruction and check for understanding.

Many of the comments about group and partner work from the LTELs in this study showed that simply having students work together was often unproductive. What seemed to happen in many cases was that group or partner members did not understand the tasks or know the necessary academic vocabulary and concepts to complete the assignments. In these cases, the students were not adequately prepared for the group work task. In addition, the teacher did not closely monitor the group interactions and did not provide the interventions needed to help students complete their assignments.

**Conclusion**

Many teachers simply focus on content knowledge rather than attending to both content and the academic language needed to comprehend and produce that content knowledge (Freeman & Freeman, 2009). Teachers who work with long-term ELs need to modify typical strategies used for ELs to meet the specific needs of these students (Olsen, 2010). Language based activities are key to developing academic literacy. Gibbons (2009) explains that activities can be “placed along a continuum from authentic real world communicative tasks to more pedagogic form focused activities” (p.78). She goes on to say that the teaching purpose will determine the type of activity and kinds of groupings used. Activities that have a communicative focus and provide a context for talking about language are helpful for exposing English language learners to academic
language. She found that language based activities that are designed to develop academic language and literacy at the same time are valuable to all students.

**Looking Ahead**

The sample size of this study was small. This allowed an in-depth examination of six LTEs, but the sample size limits the possibility of generalizing the conclusions. This study is an attempt to begin to help teachers consider what long-term ELs need from them, and it should be replicated with larger numbers of LTEs in different contexts. There is still much research that needs to be done to better understand the academic needs of long-term ELs. To begin this process, more research needs to be done with educators who work daily with long-term ELs. It is important to know what these educators understand about long-term ELs and their needs. Information gained from this type of research would give educational leaders the information they need to plan for professional development for their teachers. If teachers were better informed about who the long-term ELs are and had a better understanding of how to meet their needs, LTEs would have a greater chance of succeeding.

In addition, more research needs to be conducted on both the effects of teaching academic concepts and vocabulary to long-term ELs and the most effective ways to teach LTEs the academic concepts and vocabulary they need. This research would provide teachers of long-term ELs valuable information about how to help this population succeed academically. As educators, we do not want students like Natasha to “suffer” when they are not familiar with the academic concepts and vocabulary. Instead, we must continue to look for innovative ways to make academic language accessible to all students.
References


Appendix A

Table 1

*Data Collected for the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Total #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson Plans</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Entries</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Interviews</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Assignments</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Influence and Impact Questions Rubric*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Partially Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correctly answer at least 80% of the questions about <em>influence</em> and <em>impact</em>. Correctly explain the concepts of <em>influence</em> and <em>impact</em> when answering the interview question.</td>
<td>Correctly answer at least 60% of the questions about <em>influence</em> and <em>impact</em>. Correctly explain either <em>influence</em> or <em>impact</em> when answering interview question.</td>
<td>Correctly answer less than 60% of the questions about <em>influence</em> and <em>impact</em>. Not able to explain <em>influence</em> or <em>impact</em> when answering interview question.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Students’ Understanding of Influence and Impact*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Description of Assignment</th>
<th>Academic Vocabulary Taught</th>
<th>Pedagogical Structure(s) Used</th>
<th>Method of Evaluating Student Response</th>
<th>Results of Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal narrative essay questions</td>
<td>Students read and answer questions about personal narrative essays.</td>
<td>Influence Impact</td>
<td>Teacher Modeling Group Work Guided discussion</td>
<td>Correctly answer questions about personal narrative essays they were given. Questions included-Who impacted whom? In what way?</td>
<td>All 6 students were successful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>