

**Seeking Equitable Educational Opportunities for English Language
Learners in Elementary Schools**

(Research in progress)

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Abstract

I propose that providing equitable educational opportunities for students is to build up their identities and maximize their potential. Therefore, this research aims to explore the effectiveness and various implications of incorporating students' identities and subject learning abilities while providing equitable education for ELLs within the learning community. In order to achieve this, I plan to launch a summer reading program at an elementary school in Monongalia County, West Virginia (WV). This qualitative research study is expected to be carried out among 15 students, three to four instructors, five to six volunteer parents, and one school coordinator. An experimental pattern will be used for this research design, including surveys, classroom observations, and interviews with instructors, selected ELL students, and their parents. The duration of this research is estimated at six weeks. This reading program will be using children's literature to engage ELL students to learn English and subject content at the same time, while taking into consideration their socio-cultural backgrounds. It is anticipated that the ELL students in this program will be able to build their identities while improving their language proficiency and subject-learning abilities. It is believed that the findings will demonstrate that educators should acknowledge sociocultural theory in order to help students have a sense of belonging in the classroom and achieve an equitable educational learning environment for all students.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, classroom learning, ELL learners/students, second language acquisition

Purpose

From the sociocultural perspective, students are not receiving equitable education in the classroom because power exists everywhere through repeated discourse surroundings (Shah & Leonardo, 2016). English is the dominant language to be taught in most U.S. elementary schools. It determines which group of students are in the authoritative group, and which group is not. In the classroom, English Language Learners (ELLs) have language barriers and struggle to explain the subject contents in English (Cardoza & Brown,2011). They fail to obtain the power of language due to their lack of proficiency in English, which means that they will eventually lose equitable educational opportunities in the classroom community.

In recent years, the student population of ELLs is growing rapidly in U.S. public schools and the number is estimated to continue to stay high in the future (LeClair et al., 2009, Cardoza & Brown,2011, Sheng et al.,2011). Undoubtedly, with the increasing numbers of ELLs, U.S. schools face challenges to better support and deliver equitable and qualified instruction to them. It is well-established that if ELLs are successful in elementary school, then they will most likely continue that success in later years.

In this paper, I focus on seeking ways to provide equitable educational opportunities from sociocultural perspectives for ELLs in U.S. elementary schools. I start with the federal definition of ELLs, the process of being identified as ELL students, and English language programs in West Virginia public schools. Then, I review the research related to current situations and classroom learning for ELLs. I argue how classroom learning connects to power dynamics and communities of practice under the sociocultural theory. In order to explore ways to improve ELL students' English proficiency and subject learning abilities while providing a supportive classroom learning community to build up their self-identity, I propose a six-week summer reading program using

children’s literature. I close by discussing how to provide equitable educational opportunities for ELLs in elementary schools, and how to help them to achieve measurable learning in the classroom and to better navigate their lives from sociocultural perspectives.

Introduction

Classroom learning is important to elementary students since they spend an average of five to six hours per school day in the classroom with other peers. Educational researchers often wonder how to best support students in the classroom, especially ELLs, whose native language is not English. Currently, around five million ELLs are enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary schools (LeClair et al., 2009; Cardoza & Brown,2019). At West Virginia’s schools, there are a bit over 2,500 ELLs during the 2016-2017 school year (U.S.Department of Education, n.d.). Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean are the most common five languages spoken by ELLs in the West Virginia area.

The Federal Definition of ELLs

Based on the U.S. Department of Education and Title IX General Provision, an English language learner is defined as “ Limited English proficient” in the following (Sheng et al.2011; Zacarian, 2012):

- (25) LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT- The term ‘limited English proficient’, when used with respect to an individual, means an individual—
- (A) who is aged 3 through 21;
 - (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;
 - (C) (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
 - (ii)(I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and
 - (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency; or
 - (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other

- than English is dominant; and
 (D) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual—
 (i) the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments described in section 1111(b)(3);
 (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
 (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Basically, this definition defined by U.S. Federal government covers the age range of ELLs and several varieties of ELLs. It includes those who are not born in the United States and speak other languages. This also considers those who are born in the United States, but whose household language is other than English. Finally, the definition also takes into account those who have difficulties in using English when speaking, reading, writing, or comprehending.

ELLs Identification and ELL Programs

A home language survey is used by many states to identify ELLs, which covers basic information about the students, and three questions related to language use. Table 1 is the home language survey used in West Virginia schools.

Table 1 Home Language Survey

Date:		School:	
Grade:		Birth date:	
Student Name:			

1. What is the primary language used in the home, regardless of the language spoken by the student?
2. What is the language most often spoken by the student?
3. What is the language that the student first acquired?

(West Virginia Department of Education. Home Language Survey – Sample Form).

According to No Child Left Behind Act, every student should receive equal opportunity for academic achievement. By this policy, school districts provide English language programs to ELLs in the hope of providing support and improving their English proficiency(Zacarian, 2012, Padron et al., 2012). English language programs are mainly operated by the standard “English-based pullout models” in most districts of the U.S. (Cardoza& Brown, 2019, p.2). The ELLs are called out of class by English Second language (ESL) instructors during normal class time. They gather in small groups and have ESL instruction for about an hour per day, five days a week (Kim, 2008). In Mason county, WV, one ESL teacher is responsible for ELLs in five different schools. Some research claims that ELL programs are at a high budget but ineffective in supporting ELLs academic performance. They call for alternative ways to serve the growing population of ELLs (Cardoza & Brown,2019).

Literature Review

Current situation of ELLs

Research done by LeClair et al. (2009), Cardoza & Brown (2019), Sheng et al. (2011), indicates that many ELL students are not successful in academic achievement in U.S. classrooms and are more likely to drop out of school for multiple reasons, even though they have English language services at schools. English proficiency level of ELLs is one of the main factors that affect their performance in the classroom (Sheng et al., 2011). English is a second language for most ELLs, and language acquisitions require time and endeavor for them to comprehend in order to reach an advanced level (Kim, 2008). However, the current English as a second language (ESL) service models constrain the focus within the school context and fail to provide effective support to ELLs (Cardoza & Brown, 2019). They struggle to build their self-confidence and eventually

drop out of school due to their low performance in the classroom (LeClair et al., 2009; Cardoza & Brown,2019, Sheng et al.,2011). LeClair et al. (2009) examine the degree of support in the classroom between ELL students and non-ELL students. Their results reveal that ELL students lack self-esteem and underestimate their ability in comparison to non-ELL students. They “described themselves as having lower levels of academic efficacy and described their non-ELL classmates as having higher levels of behavioral self-control”(p.573).

Further, Sheng et al.(2011) recommend that family socioeconomic status, for example, “housing conditions, neighborhoods, parents’ educational level, and parental supervision and support”, can potentially affect students' academic achievement in the classroom(p.100). Most ELL students are from low-income families, which can “lead to a lack of social and human capital present in other groups” (Cardoza & Brown,2019, p.3). Some research documents that student from low-income families tend to have a higher school dropout percentage than the students from middle and high-income families (LeClair et al., 2009).

Another essential element that affects ELL students' performance is the cultural gulf between home and school(Cardoza & Brown, 2019; Sheng et al., 2009). Based on culturally responsive teaching, school teachers are supposed to understand students' backgrounds and design the lesson accordingly (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Unfortunately, some teachers lack understanding of ELL students due to the cultural gap (Sheng et al.,2009). This results in those students feeling less supported and motivated. They are unlikely to cooperate with classroom teachers and their peers (Cardoza & Brown, 2019). Additionally, the majority of ELL students are from minority groups, such as Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and African Americans. They face race and discrimination issues in U.S. society (Cardoza & Brown, 2019).

In general, being a marginalized group in school, ELL students lack English proficiency and self-esteem. Their families struggle with poverty and mobility. They perform poorly in school and have a high dropout rate compared to other non ELL students.

Research about Classroom Learning for ELLs

Krashen (1982) made a famous input hypothesis which claimed that comprehensive input causes acquisition. This teaching method recommends the instructor emphasize the comprehensive input to the students, then the students can produce output and gain the knowledge. “The language of ‘knowledge acquisition and ‘concept development’” is also known as acquisition metaphor (Sfard, 1998, p.5). Researchers also agree that students’ native language can help to comprehend English as a second language learning (Cardoza & Brown,2019; Kim, 2008). Gersten & Baker (2000) write that “Strategic use of students’ native language can help ensure that the development of higher-order thinking skills receives adequate curriculum focus” (p.464).

Under the second language acquisition theoretical framework, Cardoza & Brown (2019) found out that Hispanic students who received mathematics instruction in Spanish achieved a better t-test score than the students who were only taught in English at an urban Title one elementary school in the southeastern United States. They conclude that dual-language instruction can promote learning for both ELL students and non-ELL students and help them to gain academic achievement.

Kim (2008) observed two focus ELL students for ten weeks. She concluded that integrated language-based instruction, including reading and writing, works more effectively than oral language-based intervention. Research done by Cardonza &Brown (2019) and Lee et al., (2008) recommends that it is essential for language teachers to know subject content, such as math and science. Then the teachers are able to facilitate ELLs to understand English in specific discourse.

Sheng et al. (2011) call for teacher training on cultural differences to meet the needs of ELLs with various backgrounds.

Admittedly, the research reviewed in this paper has made contributions to promoting better learning for ELLs in some ways. But none of the research has discussed classroom learning related to ELLs from sociocultural perspectives, except for Cardoza & Brown (2019), who have mentioned critical cultural theory. I argue that sociocultural theory is vital in classroom learning for ELLs, especially the power and community of practice.

Theoretical Framework

For quite a long time, research in learning sciences has been mainly focused on individual minds until Lev Vygotsky's work shifted learning from the individual cognitive perspective to the sociocultural perspective (Esmonde & Booker, 2016). Under this perspective, researchers "examine the roles of social and cultural processes as mediators of human activity and thought" rather than "focus on human cognition and behavior at the individual level" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p458). Learning is a process of participation in a certain community. The learners aim to become members of that community, which is known as the participation metaphor (Sfard, 1998).

From the sociocultural perspective, classroom learning is not equal for everyone because of the power dynamics. Shah & Leonardo (2016) wrote, "learning environments are not neutral spaces. As poststructural theory reveals, learning environments are sites where power is exercised through the deployment and reproduction of discourses" (p.66). Language mediates people's thoughts and behaviors. It also acts as an artifact and wields power in various ways (Esmonde & Booker, 2016). In the United States, English is the dominant language and has power over other languages. In the classroom, ELL students not only learn the subject content but also have to

comprehend English at the same time (Cardoza & Brown, 2011). Their difficulties start when reading, listening, writing, and explaining in a language with which they are unfamiliar (Barwell,2009). This leaves ELL students at a loss because they do not have language power in English. With limited access to this language, their performance in the classroom community is hindered. Eventually, they lose equitable educational opportunities in schools.

The other important element is communities of practice. As Wenger (2009) points out that “we all belong to communities of practice” and they are formed everywhere (p.212). When we are at home, we are in a small family community. When we are at school, we are in a classroom community. When we go to work, we are in a community of job sites. We engage with different communities depending on where we are located. In sociocultural theory, learning is a process of participation in a specific community. As learners, we participate in activities within the community while learning and being impacted by others. The learners aim to become the central members of that community and engage with others. In the classroom, “learning is not only about taking on new knowledge structures, but it is about personal transformation – about becoming” (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p.467).

Being non-native English speakers, ELLs have a language barrier, which could hinder effective communication within the community. When ELLs do not understand their teacher, they often rely on scaffolding from their peers. LeClair et al. (2009) examine the degree of support in the classroom between ELLs and non-ELL students. Their results reveal that ELLs lack self-esteem and underestimate their ability in comparison to non-ELL students. Thus, ELLs’ low self-esteem acts as another barrier that prevents them from becoming active members of the classroom community. They stay at a peripheral level in that learning community. All the barriers that ELLs encounter potentially hinder them from becoming the center of the community member – resulting

in them being marginalized and vulnerable. Eventually, they drop out of school. For these reasons, I am seeking ways to provide equitable educational opportunities for ELLs in elementary school.

Positionality

For this research, I intend to investigate how to best support ELLs at elementary schools in West Virginia and how to engage with them to learn the language and subjects at the same time while taking into consideration their socio-cultural background. Further, I would like to help them to build their identities and a sense of belonging in the learning community. I worked in elementary schools both in China and the United States for more than 10 years. Additionally, I taught and learned English as a second language for more than 30 years. I am familiar with ELL students in elementary schools and have an affinity for their challenges and strengths.

When I first arrived in the United States, the English language was one of the biggest challenges for me. For example, I was not able to read the American restaurant menu. There were so many new words that I did not know and were hard for me to pronounce correctly. I have spent months and months of effort studying the menu and still have questions about this type of authentic English which I did not learn in school when I was in China. To be honest, I still struggle with these issues now. Every time, I go to a restaurant, some strange words always stick out on the menu, I would either check the dictionary on my phone or ask the waiter what it is exactly. When I was in graduate school at West Virginia University, I tried multiple attempts for the speaking test. Unfortunately, I failed to get a passing score. I began to question my English proficiency and lost confidence to take tests again. In general, I feel this language barrier has hindered my ability and lowered my self-esteem.

The other difficulty I met in the United States was lacking a sense of belonging as I identified myself as an outsider in this country. My hometown is millions of miles away. I am not

able to see my childhood close friends and family members for a year or more at a time. Even though I can call them over the phone and talk to them, the feeling is totally different from hanging out in person. I always miss their physical companionship. Because of the Covid pandemic, I have not been to my country for nearly four years. Thinking about these years of being alone in a foreign country, I am very emotional, and my tears could not help but come out.

Related to my personal experience, I can imagine the difficult situations ELL students encounter when they are in elementary school. When the ELLs first arrive in the United States, it definitely takes them quite a long time to adjust to the new environment since their hometown and close friends are far away. Even though some of the ELLs are born in the United States, their household language is other than English. They may not be exposed to English when they are at home. Learning subjects in a second language environment adds another layer of difficulty for ELL students compared to other non-ELL students (Cardoza & Brown,2019). Moreover, as Wenger (2009) states, learning in school is a way of having interaction with classroom community members under the sociocultural theory perspective. Being a marginalized and vulnerable group, those ELLs lack effective communication with classroom teachers and peers due to their English proficiency level and low self-esteem.

Undoubtedly, ELLs have unique perspectives and are beneficial for both their home country and the English-speaking country as well. Related to my personal experience, when I was a Chinese guest teacher at Ridgedale Elementary school in Morgantown, WV, I succeeded in immersing students in another culture and broadening their viewpoints. Rosado-May, et. al (2020) recommend incorporating an indigenous way of learning in American schools, especially in the indigenous communities. I agree that “education is based on the combined and dynamic process of both passing on knowledge and learning/constructing knowledge through everyday activities”

(p.85). Combining indigenous ways of learning in education is important and necessary for both indigenous and American children. In other words, indigenous knowledge and ELLs' unique backgrounds are valuable.

Based on my analysis so far, the papers I reviewed have not discussed supporting ELLs from sociocultural perspectives. Regarding my personal experience and sociocultural theory, **I argue that helping ELLs build self-identity and gain a sense of belonging are keys to success in classroom learning.** Therefore, in this qualitative research study, I plan to launch a summer reading program target for ELLs to explore how to incorporate their identity and content subject knowledge into the learning community. This study will be guided by the following research questions:

- How can we design a reading program to engage the ELLs to learn English and subject content at the same time while taking their sociocultural background into consideration?
- How can the reading program help ELLs build their identities and a sense of belonging in the classroom learning community?

Method

Research design

I plan to launch a summer reading program, which is expected to be located at an elementary school in Monongalia County, WV. It will be held 6 hours per day, 5 days per week, and over the length of 6 weeks. The study is interested in working with ELLs from kindergarten to 2nd grade. The ideal number of ELLs will be around five to eight. Other non-ELL students will be welcome to join this program with a target enrollment of no more than 15 students. The reading program will incorporate math, science, English, and developing self-identity by using children's literature, while providing an equitable classroom learning community for all the students.

This case study of ELLs in the summer reading program will be grounded in sociocultural theory and guided by the ethnographic method. As a researcher, I will participate in designing the reading program and go to the site to observe the class daily while taking field notes. The observation time will be approximately 2 hours per day, 10 hours per week, for a total of 60 hours. Pre-survey and post-survey will be given to all the students who enrolled in the reading program. The interview will be conducted with all the instructors, two to three selected ELL students, and their parents before and after the reading program.

Site and participants

Before starting the summer reading program, I will have an investigation focused on ELLs and English language learning programs at elementary schools in Monongalia County, WV. I will talk to school principals and teachers, then select an elementary school to launch the program. Ideally, this study will involve 10 to 15 students, including five to eight ELLs, one schoolteacher as a coordinator, three to four preservice teachers as instructors, and five to six parents as volunteers for this program. As a researcher, I will design the reading program curriculum with the cooperation of kindergarten to second-grade school teachers. I will also go to the site every day to observe the classroom and collect data.

Fieldwork and Data collection

Pre-survey and post-survey. The survey will be carried out on all the student participants before and after the reading program. It aims to assess students' proficiency levels in English, math, and science, their evaluation of self-identity, and the support they are getting from the program. I will design Pre-survey and post-survey by using a questionnaire.

Interviews with instructors, ELL students, and their parents. Before and after the program, thirty-minute interviews will be conducted with the instructors, two to three selected ELLs, and

their parents. I will use a different protocol for each group. For the interview with instructors, I will ask six to eight questions, including their opinions about self-identity, lesson design on how to incorporate language learning and subject content, and ideas on providing an equitable classroom learning community. Related to the interview with ELL students, I will examine their self-evaluation of English proficiency and subject learning ability, how they feel about themselves as students, and the support they are getting. Regarding the interview with their parents, I will investigate their childhood self-identities and their expectations of their own children.

Observation. As a researcher, I will be responsible for the program curriculum design, physically be at the site every day, and have conversations with instructors at the end of the workday. The classroom observation time will be approximately 2 hours per day, 10 hours per week, and 60 hours in total. At the same time, I will write field notes during the regular observation time.

Data collection procedures

This research will be carried out among 15 students, three to four instructors, five to six volunteer parents, and one school coordinator in an elementary school. A week before the summer reading program, the pre-survey will be given to all the student participants to determine their current level of English proficiency, subject content learning ability, and self-evaluation of identity. Then, I will select two to three ELLs as focus students in this case study. Two days before the program, a pre-interview will be given to all the instructors, selected ELLs, and their parents.

During the study, the student participants will be taught Children's literature, math, science, and art in the morning. In the afternoon, they will participate in some fun activities, such as personal story sharing and drawing, and group games. The morning session will be held in a classroom, and some of the afternoon sessions will be held at a school playground. I will go to the

classroom, observe the morning session, and take field notes. In the afternoon, I will participate in the activities and make some casual observations. Additionally, I will discuss classroom learning with the instructors at the end of each workday. Then we will make some adjustments for the next day's class, if necessary.

On the last day of the reading program, a post-survey will be given to all the student participants in order to make comparisons with the growth of English proficiency, subject learning ability, and self-identity. During the last week of the program, the interview will be given to all the instructors, selected ELL students, and their parents to investigate the impact of the program.

Plan for Data Analysis

This study will mainly use qualitative approaches for data analysis, which comprise classroom observations and interviews with all the instructors, selected ELL students, and their parents. It will also apply the quantitative approach as a supplement, including a pre-survey and a post-survey. Videography will be used to analyze the classroom observations. Comparisons will be made between the pre-survey and the post-survey among all the student participants. Data will be obtained through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) will be used to calculate the statistics.

Educational importance of the study

This study aims to explore the effectiveness and various implications of incorporating students' identity and subject content knowledge while providing equitable education for ELLs in the classroom learning community. It is expected that the ELL students in this program will be able to build their self-identities while improving their language proficiency and subject learning abilities. They will feel support in the classroom and gain insight into the various communities

around them. It is also anticipated that the instructors will be aware of ELL students' challenges and strengths and provide an equitable learning environment for all the students. The reading program will create a valuable booklist for children to develop their self-identity from a sociocultural perspective. This booklist will serve as a guideline for instructors on providing equity in classroom learning as well.

The findings will suggest that educators should acknowledge sociocultural theory in order to help students to have a sense of belonging in the classroom to achieve equity. Therefore, I argue that power dynamics and communities of practice from sociocultural perspectives will make an impact on classroom learning for ELL students. Power is related to equity. If equity could be achieved, the issue of power could eventually be eradicated. Common sense tells us that equity is defined as treating everyone in the same way. Actually, the crucial part of equity is to find our own identity and maximize potentiality, which is written by Nasir et al. (2006): "Equity is not about offering or producing sameness, but about enabling youth to appropriate the repertoires they need in order to live the richest life possible and reach their full academic potential" (p.499). This landmark quotation reminds educators to maximize students' potentialities and build their identities.

I am sure the ELLs have the talent and desire to learn languages and subject content at school. If the teacher can maximize their learning abilities and maintain high expectations for them, their language proficiency and subject content knowledge will be improved. The teachers should welcome different thoughts and encourage students to share their culture and ideas openly. The peers should respect each other and value their own identity. Most importantly, school systems should work out better policies to support ELLs. Their home knowledge should be considered valuable rather than "a deficit and an obstacle to learning" (Bernal,2002, p.112). By adopting an

asset-based approach, an equitable classroom learning environment will be achieved with the joint efforts of teachers, students, and school systems.

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Appendix

The Summer Reading Program Curriculum

Week	theme	Reason for this Content
Week 1	Name	The first step of having self-identity is a person's name, which carries lots of means and information about oneself. I plan to collect some children's books related to this topic and help students speak out their names with confidence.
Week 2	Friends	There is a saying, a friend in need is a friend indeed. However, in reality, not everyone can be your true friend. Some people may even treat you awful. In the second week, I plan to incorporate some children's literature related to the topic of friends and help students on how to make a friend, and how to position themselves in a community of friends.
Week 3	Family	Family is important in a person's life. Everyone expects their family to be a warm and comfortable place. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Families may have various issues. This week, I will share some children's books with the family theme, and help students to overcome some family obstacles. Meanwhile, I will guide them on how to position in a family community, while enjoy the time with their family members.
Week 4	classroom	Students spend most of their school time in a classroom. Naturally, they are positioned by their teachers and peers. At the

		same time, they position themselves in the same learning community. This week, I plan to talk about how to position self-identity in a positive way within a classroom community.
Week 5	Culture	The ELL students or their parents may come from another county with different culture. In this unite, I plan to discuss how to respect others with unique background, and how to prescribe the same artifact from diverse perspectives.
Week 6	Review	For this last week, I plan to review all the topics mentioned above, and help students to make their personal storybooks. Then, I will encourage them to share the books with their families and friends.