Coaching Teachers of English Language Learners

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COACHING TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The following qualitative study examined how Reading First Literacy Coaches refined their literacy coaching to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Hispanic English language learners (ELLs) in 30 elementary schools located along the US Mexico Border. Data were gathered from the coaches through written surveys and a focus group. Findings from the coaches’ practices identified three themes: 1) Coaches understood bilingual programs and the theory underlying such instruction; 2) Coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences about ELLs; and 3) Coaches faced challenges in meeting the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs. This study is an addition to the literature that describes and contextualizes the work of instructional coaches. It has practical implications for schools seeking to build the capacity of teachers of ELLs. Guidance is suggested related to hiring coaches with special dispositions and the professional development of existing coaches.
COACHING TEACHERS OF ELLs

Schools in the United States have been faced with rapidly changing student demographics over the last decade. In particular, there has been a large increase in the number of English language learners (ELLs). The ELL population has grown by 60% making it the fastest growing student group in the country (Escamilla, 2007). Statistics indicate that as many as 1 in 9 students is an ELL (Goldenberg, 2008). Ballantyne, Sanderman and Levy (2008) note, “Given the growth of the ELL population over the past ten years, it is probably safe to assume that a majority of American teachers now have at least one ELL in their classes” (p. 9).

Although most of the responsibility of educating ELLs is traditionally placed on the teachers, this responsibility should be shared by all stakeholders (Clair & Adger, 1999). In other words, teachers need to be supported when educating ELLs. Providing relevant professional development is one form of support (Clair & Adger, 1999). Many school districts have selected coaching as a professional development model (Borman & Feger, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Russo, 2004). This article reports the results of a study that examined the relationship between coaches and teachers of ELLs. The purpose of the study was to investigate what coaching adjustments instructional coaches made to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students.

Definition of ELLs

An ELL can be defined as “a child whose native language is other than English and who is learning English as a second language” (Escamilla, 2007, p.1). However, the term ELL includes a heterogeneous group of students. First, ELLs are at varying levels of English oral language and literacy development (Goldenberg, 2008). Some ELLs have developed reading and writing skills in English while others have only developed oral proficiency in their second language. Some ELLs started to learn English in their countries of origin while others arrive in the United States not speaking any English. Second, ELLs also vary greatly in the level of literacy they have developed in their native language (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). For example, some ELLs fall under what Freeman and Freeman (2008) call “recent immigrants with adequate schooling [italics added].” These students arrive in the United States with native language literacy skills, content area knowledge, and academic skills appropriate for their grade level. In contrast, “recent immigrants with limited or interrupted schooling [italics added]” arrive in U.S. schools behind their grade-level counterparts. Many of them have
very poor reading and writing skills in their native language. Some of them have never been in school. Third, it is very important to point out that not all ELLs are recent immigrants. In fact, most ELLs were born in this country (Escamilla, 2007; Goldenberg, 2008). Many fall under the category of long-term ELLs. These students have been in the United States for more than seven years (Freeman & Freeman, 2008) and yet, they are still not proficient in academic English.

Achievement Gap

Schools and teachers are under enormous pressure to help ELLs meet national and state accountability demands. Assessment results indicate that ELLs are achieving well below the national standards. ELLs perform lower than their English-dominant counterparts on large-scale assessments (Durán, 2008). Goldenberg (2008) reports:

On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, fourth-grade ELLs scored 36 points below non-ELLs in reading and 25 points below non-ELLs in Math. The gaps among eighth graders were even larger - 42 points in reading and 37 points in Math. (p. 11)

In addition, ELLs are falling behind academically in all content areas, especially in those that demand higher levels of English language proficiency (Abedi & Gándara, 2006). ELLs have a higher drop-out rate than their non-ELL counterparts (Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). While 10% of English speaking young adults do not complete high school, 31% of ELLs drop out before graduation (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Drop-out rates are influenced in part by grade retention. About 40 or 50% of 15 to 17 year old Hispanic students are below grade level, which indicates that they have been retained (Bowman-Perrot et al., 2010). Moreover, Hispanics have the lowest level of bachelor degree completion among ethnic groups (Gándara, 2010), and most ELLs (75%) are Hispanic (Escamilla, 2007).

Accompanying the achievement gap is the critical issue that ELLs need high quality teachers in the classroom. Villarreal (2005) argues the achievement gap between minority and White students is primarily due to teacher quality. The number of certified bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers needs to increase and so does the instructional capacity of teachers serving ELLs in the mainstream classroom (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Horowitz et al., 2009; NEA Research, 2005).
Teacher Quality

The Council of Great City Schools, a group of the top 65 urban districts in the country, has acknowledged that urban school districts have been struggling with the challenges of teaching ELLs (Horowitz et al., 2009). The Council’s research identified six enduring challenges to the improvement of achievement for ELLs. One challenge was that of the critical shortage of qualified teachers for ELLs faced by districts. Nationally, only 29.5% of teachers working with ELLs in their classrooms report having had the training to do so effectively and 57% of teachers report needing more professional development in this area (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Moreover, close to 40% of teachers working with ELLs in 2005 had not received professional development in the field, and about 20% of teachers had less than 10 hours of in-service on how to address the needs of ELLs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education reported as early as 2001 that “addressing the needs of limited English proficient students is the professional development area in which teachers are least likely to participate” (NEA research, 2005, para.10). Based on this challenge, the Council of Great City Schools recommended that school districts “ensure that all teachers of ELLs have access to high quality professional development that provides differentiated instructional strategies, promotes the effective use of student assessment data, and develops skills for supporting second-language acquisition across the curriculum” (Horowitz, 2009, p. 35). Most recently, the 2010 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher revealed that 63% of the teachers surveyed believed better instructional strategies for teaching ELLs would have a major impact on their ability to address diverse learning needs of students (MetLife Survey, 2010).

Professional Development

Quality professional development is essential for creating quality schools for minority students (Villarreal, 2005). Such programs enhance teacher quality and upgrade teachers’ capacity to influence achievement for all students, especially ELLs. Studies of promising practices of districts that have been successful in the education of ELLs have found that such districts provide ‘high quality and relevant professional development’ for the teachers of ELLs (Horowitz et al., 2009, p. 22). The Council of the Great City Schools reported,

Given the importance of access to quality teachers for student achievement – particularly among ELLs – it came as no surprise that access to high quality professional development for general
education teachers and ELL teachers alike was instrumental in the reform initiative of improving districts. (p. 22)
In particular the team found that higher quality professional development programs: ...went beyond merely transmitting information and involved hands-on, site-based strategies such as lesson or technique modeling, coaching [emphasis added] and providing feedback based on close monitoring of practice. (p. 22)

Their description of quality professional development is consistent with research on best practices that support teacher learning. In particular, research supports professional development that expands teachers’ knowledge of content and pedagogy; offers opportunities for active, hands-on learning; allows teachers to apply new content and reflect on outcomes with peers; links curriculum, assessment, and standards teacher learning; and is intensive, ongoing and sustained over time (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Likewise, a panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners convened by the Center for Applied Linguistics and working on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, proposed literacy coaches as a potential solution to the inadequate teacher capacity to work with ELLs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). The International Reading Association has recommended that literacy coaches receive special training on issues related to ELLs. Coaches, in turn, would be expected to instruct teachers on second language acquisition, serve as resources for teachers, and share strategies with teachers addressing literacy and content area instruction for ELLs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Coaching

Of particular interest to the authors of this article was the specific identification of coaching as part of the professional development program for improving the instructional capacity of ELL teachers. Over the last decade, districts interested in systemic change for school improvement have been encouraged to utilize peer coaching as a professional development model for teacher growth (Brown, Stroh, Fouts, & Baker, 2005; Wagner, 2007). Districts such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, and Boston have utilized coaching to build instructional capacity of the district and teachers (Borman & Feger, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Russo, 2004).

The rationale for coaching as a preferred means for professional development has been established in the literature. The increased use of coaching is largely due to the lack of change in teachers’ practices or children’s achievement
from traditional one-day in-service professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In addition, teachers want more continuing support in implementing new practices (Miller, 1998). Joyce and Calhoun (2010) identified peer coaching as the most effective means for transfer of new learning to classroom practice.

The National Staff Development Council acknowledges the role of coaching in developing teacher capacity. They state,

Good teaching occurs when educators on teams are involved in a cycle in which they analyze data, determine student and adult learning goals based on that analysis, design joint lessons that use evidence-based strategies, have access to coaches for support [emphasis added] in improving their classroom instruction, and then assess how their learning and teamwork affects student achievement. (Hirsch, 2009. p. 10)

Coaching provides the type of ongoing, contextualized support that has an impact on teacher learning and practices (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Knight, 2009).

**Reading and Literacy Initiatives**

Ongoing professional development for teachers is often provided by literacy coaches (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Research indicates that literacy coaching is a superior method of implementing change when compared to short-term presentations or workshops (Sailors & Price, 2010). However, questions have been posed concerning the effectiveness of Reading First coaches, especially in low-income schools with multilingual students (Cummins, 2007).

Reading First was a program designed to close the achievement gap between Title 1, low income schools, and schools in higher socioeconomic areas (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson & Autio, 2007). One of the important components of Reading First was having literacy coaches to support teachers in implementing the components of the program. More than 5,200 schools hired literacy coaches as part of Reading First (Deussen et al., 2007) to help teachers implement the five major components of Reading First: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Carnahan et al., 2004).

Although funding for Reading First has ended, questions remain about which parts of Reading First may have been effective and should be continued and which parts did not work (Manzo, 2008). Researchers have especially questioned the rigidity of the Reading First coaching (Cummins, 2007; Mallozzi, McLean, & Hu, 2008). Mallozzi et al. (2008) refer to professional development.
presented by Reading First coaches as “redelivery” of professional development that the coaches have received as some even used “scripted and formulaic PowerPoint presentations” to present professional development to teachers (p. 15). Cummins (2007) indicates this approach leads to inflexibility in the classroom with an emphasis on skills that fail to engage students with reading. He further asserts that students’ individual culture and language are not valued when rigid programs are implemented.

Not all school districts implemented Reading First rigidly. One example was the San Francisco Unified School District which noted improved academic performance of ELLs in schools served by Reading First. Reading First literacy coaches delivered additional professional development to equip teachers with the skills to support English language development among ELLs (Horowitz, et al., 2009). Reading First provided the infrastructure for the delivery of the ELL teachers’ professional development.

A different example is presented in this article. The following research looks at ways some Reading First coaches did adjust their coaching for the cultural and linguistic differences of teachers and ELLs in their classrooms.

**Method**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the coaching adjustments instructional coaches made to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students. Three questions guided the research:

1. What is the role of the coach?
2. How is coaching adjusted to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse teachers?
3. How is coaching adjusted to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse students?

**Participants and Setting**

Thirty elementary school literacy coaches, working in schools along the Mexican border, participated in the study. At the time of the study, they were working at thirty different schools as Reading First Coaches, focused on kindergarten through third grade classrooms. About 34 percent of the students in the schools were ELLs (English language learners) and 96 percent were categorized
as economically disadvantaged. All coaches were females, and all but one were Hispanic. Most of the literacy coaches had 3 or more years of coaching experience before the study and had extensive teaching experience before becoming coaches. Of the 26 coaches who answered an online follow-up survey, 20 had more than 8 years of teaching experience before becoming a coach.

**Data Collection**

Data to answer the three research questions came from three sources in order to triangulate and validate findings (Creswell, 2002). The first data were collected in a survey given before a professional development session for the literacy coaches. The survey focused on the role of the coach and the adjustments coaches make to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse teachers and students.

Although the survey was anonymous and voluntary, participants could include their name if they were willing to participate in a follow-up focus group. The researchers left the room during the survey and had a volunteer place the surveys in an envelope. Of the 36 coaches at the meeting, 30 chose to participate in the first survey.

The second source of data was a focus group with four coaches who had volunteered to participate in follow-up research, and were available the evening of the focus group. The primary purpose of the focus group was to clarify and expand on the responses to the initial survey. The researchers wrote a few focus group questions in advance and then followed up on those questions based on the responses of the coaches. Responses were audio taped and transcribed.

Due to a desire to collect follow-up data from more than the four focus group participants, the researchers designed an anonymous online survey. Twenty-six of the 36 coaches responded to the survey. This survey included multiple choice as well as open-ended questions.
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Figure 1: Survey administered at meeting of literacy coaches.

1. Gender ______________________
2. Age ______________________
3. Ethnicity ____________________
4. Years of experience in coaching _____
   Please answer the following questions in detail:

5. What is your role as a coach?
6. How do you adapt your coaching to meet the needs of diverse teachers? (coaching style and/or content)
7. How do you adapt your coaching to meet the needs of diverse students?
8. What role does students’ first language play in your coaching? Why?
9. What factors do you take into consideration when you coach a teacher? (teacher and/or students culture, language, age, gender, religion, abilities/disabilities, years of experience, etc.)
10. Why do you feel those factors are important?

Optional

Please include your contact information if you are willing to provide additional information:

Name ______________________
Home Telephone ________________
Cell Phone ____________________
Email _________________________
Mailing address __________________

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis by searching for repeated words and phrases and patterns (Grbich, 2007). Then the data were categorized according to the patterns that emerged (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Each of the three researchers analyzed the data for patterns separately and subsequently met to discuss areas of overlap and broad themes. The themes included in this article are only those that address the ways the coaches adapted their work for teachers of ELLs.
Figure 2: Questions used to guide a follow-up focus group session.

1. What data do you collect?
   a. Student data
   b. Teacher data
   c. During observations (specific forms)?
2. Describe what you do with the data collected.
3. Elaborate on the significance of teachers’ years of experience.
   a. Does coaching differ for more or less experienced teachers?
4. What are some suggestions you give teachers to address the needs of diverse students?
5. Describe the process of mentoring a teacher.
   a. How does diversity influence?
   b. Does the amount of mentoring time vary?
   c. Specific practices
6. What is your philosophy of bilingual education?
7. What role does students’ first language play in your coaching?
8. How does campus or district leadership influence your role as a coach?

Results

The analysis of the data obtained from this study revealed that most of the strategies and trainings participants described are standard practices that coaches who followed Reading First guidelines usually performed. However, there were distinctive aspects of the coaches’ practices that emerged based on their work with teachers of ELLs. Findings from the literacy coaches’ practices in this study can be organized in three major themes: 1) The coaches understood bilingual programs and the theory underlying such instruction; 2) The coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences to meet the needs of ELLs; and 3) The coaches faced challenges in their attempt to meet the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs.
Figure 3: Anonymous online follow-up survey administered to literacy coaches.

1. What do you feel is your greatest contribution to your campus as a coach?
2. How many years did you teach before becoming a literacy coach?
3. What type of teacher preparation program did you go through?
4. What is the highest degree you have earned?
5. In what areas do you hold certifications?
6. Are you currently pursuing any degrees or certification?
7. What are your future career plans?
8. Please choose the approximate percentage of your work time spent on each task below. The percentages should total about 100 percent.
   a. Modeling lessons or team teaching in classrooms
   b. Observing and providing feedback to individual teachers
   c. Data analysis
   d. Attending professional development
   e. Planning and providing professional development
   f. Meeting with administrators
   g. Other
9. If you answered “other” to the question above, please describe the task(s).
10. Approximately how often do you visit or meet with individual teachers?
11. How does your coaching differ for new teachers versus experienced teachers? Please be as specific as possible.
12. What are the main purposes of meetings with campus administrators?
13. Did you provide or arrange for any professional development in addition to the Reading First professional development? If so, please give examples and indicate if the professional development was provided by you or someone else.
14. Which of the following best describes the bilingual/English as a second language program at your school?
   a. Early exit (initial instruction in Spanish with transition to English as quickly as possible)
   b. Late exit (maintaining first language while learning English)
   c. Dual language (all student, including English dominant students, receive instruction in English and Spanish)
   d. Structured English immersion (instruction in English with support as needed in Spanish)
   e. English only
15. If you would like to further describe the bilingual/ESL program at your school, please do so below.
16. What percentage of the students at your school learn to read in Spanish first?

Understanding Bilingual Education

The literacy coaches who participated in this study demonstrated an understanding of the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs. This understanding stemmed from their initial teacher preparation. The majority of the coaches (92%) held a bilingual teacher certification. These coaches worked in a region with large
numbers of ELLs, therefore holding a bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) certification was very important. The coaches explained that most of the schools where they worked opted to implement an early-exit transitional bilingual model to provide education to ELLs. The primary objective of these kinds of bilingual programs is to help students achieve English language proficiency as quickly as possible and move them into an all-English curriculum. Nevertheless, students’ first languages are used as a medium of instruction to keep students on grade level while they acquire English proficiency. The coaches who participated in this study indicated that Spanish, the students’ first language, was used for instruction; the amount and type of Spanish instruction and/or support varied considerably from campus to campus.

Coaches believed in providing a strong foundation in the students’ first language. They understood the importance of developing the students’ first language in order “to make the transition into their second language more successful.” Moreover, the linguistic needs of the students impacted the work coaches engaged in with the teachers of ELLs.

**Supporting Teachers of ELLs**

Coaches explained that the Spanish language was sometimes used to communicate with Spanish dominant teachers. One coach explained, “We have many teachers, like many students, whose native language is Spanish... [who] need to feel respected... when spoken to.” Likewise, the coaches who participated in this study took into consideration the needs of the students when coaching the teachers. One coach explained that “coaching the teachers on strategies to use during instruction helps students.” That is, teachers’ needs stem from their students’ needs; therefore, students’ first language was perceived as a factor that impacted coaching. Moreover, one coach stated that “language is the primary factor considered when instructing children in literacy.” Coaches added that students’ first language impacted testing and grouping decisions. They explained the campus Language Proficiency Assessment Committee assesses the students’ first and second language proficiency. The assessment results are used to make both instructional and testing decisions. As one of the coaches stated, “data drives the instruction.” Students are categorized according to language proficiency. They are assessed in their dominant language (English or Spanish), using the state standardized early literacy assessment. Data from these assessments are analyzed and students are grouped accordingly to provide literacy instruction. Part of the coaches’ role is to support teachers by planning together, modeling instruction in...
their classrooms, and team teaching lessons. Therefore, coaches felt that it was
important for them to be able to model lessons and team teach in the students’
first language when working with teachers who delivered literacy instruction in
Spanish.

One of the most important roles of the coach is to support teachers in the
delivery of literacy instruction. In their attempt to support those teachers who
work primarily with ELLs, coaches shared with them a variety of strategies.
Coaches paid special attention to vocabulary development when working with
teachers of Hispanic ELLs. One coach explained her rationale by stating, “Because
we have a large population of ELLs, we need to address vocabulary instruction.
The explicit instruction of vocabulary is what I believe is the key to improving
reading comprehension.” Several coaches indicated that students’ first language is
drawn upon when teaching vocabulary by providing specific strategies on the use
of cognates. Cognates are words in two languages that are similar in spelling and
meaning because they have the same origin or root. One coach explained, “I give
teachers a way to help students understand the English language better by using
cognates.”

Literacy coaches also used other strategies to support teachers of Hispanic
ELLs. Coaches encouraged teachers to use ESL strategies and scaffolding.
Scaffolding is providing temporary assistance for students and reducing such help
as students become more proficient. One coach explained that “it is imperative to
differentiate the delivery of instruction when dealing with ELLs.” She added, “I do
not use ‘water down’ [sic] instruction, but I do provide many scaffolding
strategies.” Coaches also stressed the importance of “making content
comprehensible while developing academic language.” This strategy is aligned with
sheltered instruction. ELLs must develop academic language, or the language of
schooling and the content areas, to succeed in school. Sheltered instruction is
used to help ELLs develop academic English and content knowledge
simultaneously in a risk-free environment where specific strategies, such as read
alouds, visuals, and hands-on activities, are used to make instruction
comprehensible for ELLs. Literacy coaches also worked with teachers on strategies
to activate background knowledge and experiences. “It is critical to keep in mind
student background, primary language, and especially search for what types of
prior knowledge students bring into the classroom. With this in mind, I highly
stress the use of manipulatives, songs, [and] games that will assist student learning
to the highest level.” Learning centers were used to address the needs of ELLs.
Coaches explained that some students receive large group instruction in English, but receive Spanish instruction and/or reinforcement in the centers.

While some coaches stressed the use of specific strategies to address the needs of teachers of ELLs, others focused on adapting the strategies that are used with English dominant students to fit the needs of ELLs. After all, as one coach stated, “reading is reading regardless of the language.” Another coach stated that “the techniques, activities, lessons, etc. can be used with all students by adjusting the language and level of difficulty.” One more participant mentioned that “all effective strategies may be utilized with all students as long as language adaptations are made.”

**Challenges**

Some of the challenges faced by coaches when working with teachers of ELLs were finding materials and providing adequate professional development. Coaches felt that resources in Spanish were limited or more difficult to find. They also felt that some available materials were not authentic, that is, they were just literal translations from the English material. Coaches felt a need for additional professional development for teachers working with ELLs. Therefore, several coaches took the initiative to provide the required training on how the bilingual program works, on how students acquire language, and on research-based practices.

Despite the challenges, coaches displayed a good disposition towards teachers of ELLs. One of the most important indicators of the coaches’ commitment to support teachers of ELLs was valuing the students they work with and their strengths. One coach stated that students “like to know that someone genuinely values them.” One more participant explained “These children can learn a second language if we are there for them and consider their academic as well as language needs.” Another coach eloquently wrote, “Well, I share what I know about our student’s population [sic]; I know our students are very similar to me. I was a bilingual student; I know and understand their needs.”

**Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Our study of Reading First coaches explored the coaching adjustments made to meet the needs of teachers of ELLs. Each of the three themes that emerged from the research not only add to the body of knowledge about coaching teachers of ELLs but also have implications for practice.
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Understanding Bilingual Education

The results of this study showed, as indicated by the first theme, that participating literacy coaches understood bilingual education and the theory on which it is based. Districts should consider hiring literacy coaches who possess specialized knowledge about ELLs. Knight (2006) suggests that hiring the right instructional coaches is the most critical factor related to the success or failure of a coaching program. However, in reality, it may not always be possible to hire coaches with extensive background knowledge and experience in bilingual or ESL education.

Districts must focus on providing relevant professional development for its practicing literacy coaches related to bilingual and ESL education. Specifically, our findings suggest possible topics for literacy coaches’ professional development: research and instructional practices related to first and second language acquisition, characteristics and needs, program models, and differentiated instruction for ELLs. Such topics may be used to build and develop coaches’ capacity to support teachers of ELLs. Although the literature supports these topics as a foundation for teachers of ELLs (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Ovando & Combs, 2012), little research exists on the background knowledge needed by coaches who work with these teachers. Literacy coaches can also take college courses to expand their knowledge or look for books and articles that explain the basic principles and theories of second language acquisition and their implications for instruction. Then coaches and teachers can engage in book studies to understand ELLs, their needs, and practical applications of second language acquisition theory.

This theme also indicates that a positive disposition or attitude about bilingual education and ELLs is important for literacy coaches. Coaches in this study repeatedly expressed the importance of developing literacy in the first language to serve as a foundation for literacy in English. In addition, they mentioned specific strategies, such as the use of cognates that draw on students’ first language. Successful coaches of teachers of ELLs should value students’ languages and encourage teachers to do the same. Coaches and teachers do not need to speak the students’ languages, although it certainly helps. They can show they value the students’ language by encouraging students to continue developing their native language especially by inviting families to engage in first language literacy activities at home. They can have books, reference materials, and other resources in the students’ first languages available in the classroom and school.
library. They can also invite guests to read and speak to the students in their first language.

Supporting Teachers of ELLs

As indicated by the second resulting theme, coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Coaches encouraged teachers to pay special attention to vocabulary development. They also encouraged them to use a variety of ESL strategies and scaffolding techniques. Most importantly, coaches mentioned the importance of making instruction comprehensible for ELLs while delivering instruction at grade level by using strategies that help students see and experience new English vocabulary.

In addition to sharing specific strategies with the teachers of ELLs, the coaches held high expectations for ELL students. The region where this study was conducted has a high number of ELLs, and the pressures of accountability are felt by everyone. ELLs are expected to perform satisfactorily on state assessments, just like English dominant students. Coaches worked closely with teachers to help ELLs develop literacy in English and to have high expectations for their success.

Challenges

The third theme from our data identified the challenges that coaches face when working with teachers of ELLs. Coaches’ challenges included finding adequate and authentic materials in students’ native language and the need to provide additional professional development on the needs of ELLs over and above the Reading First curriculum. The coaches in this study were able to modify and add to the “basic Reading First professional development sessions” offered to teachers of ELLs because they possessed specialized knowledge, skills and dispositions related to bilingual education.

This study supports the findings of the San Francisco Unified School District of how Reading First literacy coaches can modify a curricular initiative to meet the needs of teachers and students who serve a large ELL population. San Francisco modified their Reading First program to include a professional development component that focused on ELLs for targeted schools. This component was successful in supporting teachers’ efforts to improve student achievement of ELLs through a reform initiative focused on literacy (Horowitz, et al., 2009).
Significance

Especially in light of growing numbers of ELLs in districts which previously did not have large numbers of non-native English speakers, this research is significant because it looks at how literacy coaches can support teachers of ELLs. The research found coaching teachers of ELLs requires an understanding of second language acquisition, high expectations, and an emphasis on strategies that make English comprehensible to ELLs. Teachers of ELLs need the support, and literacy coaches with appropriate knowledge and dispositions may be able to help them.

Literacy coaches and teachers of ELLs also face many challenges, including a lack of materials in the students’ native languages and some curricula written for native English speakers. In this study, literacy coaches’ practices and beliefs were modified to take into account students and teachers’ culture and language. Such modifications address Cummins’ (2007) criticism of Reading First for its rigidity and failure to attend to the culturally and linguistically diverse needs of students.

In the past, little research looked at how literacy coaches modified their practices for teachers of ELLs. Researchers have called for peer reviewed empirical research that describes and contextualizes the work of instructional coaches (e.g., Gallucci et al. 2010). Our study begins this research effort. Further research needs to be conducted to link the steps coaches take to increase teachers’ effectiveness for teaching ELLs and the impact on student learning.
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