

A Case Study of a Young ELL in a Rural Elementary School

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Abstract

This case study takes place in Jessica Graff's third grade classroom at Freshwater Elementary School in Eureka, CA. The third grader that I observe is Alicia (an alias), who was born in Mexico, but has attended school in the United States since she moved here as a three year old. Her family is from Mexico and emigrated here before she was born. Although her L1 is Spanish, she has been entirely mainstreamed into her third grade class due to her high performance in her Language Arts lessons. She is gregarious and comfortable speaking English in class with her friends and with her teacher. She enjoys reading and frequently takes out a book to read when she finishes her work early. Her most recent California English Language Development Test (CELDT) was taken in September of 2010. Her overall score was 479, which places her at the Intermediate performance level. Her most recent CELDT was taken at her previous school, Pacific Union Elementary School, another school in Humboldt County, CA. This is her first year at Freshwater Charter Middle School. Alicia struggles in Mathematics, but excels in Language Arts. This illustrates Krashen's theory about second language acquisition, which is that an English Language Learner's skill in Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) develops more swiftly than Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Krashen asserts that BICS often takes approximately three to five years to develop whereas CALP can take seven to ten years to fully develop. The fact that her language skills are highly developed, but her performance in other content areas are below average also coincides with Cummins' assertion about language proficiency; that one's proficiency in his or her primary language contributes to the level of understanding in the second language. The level of

proficiency in the L1 can effect the development of the L2. If Alicia has a certain level of comfort and familiarity with the linguistic structure of Spanish, it will help her gain a stronger grasp of English quicker than if she had a less than adequate grasp of the Spanish language. Currently, her father practices Spanish with her at home, but Alicia says that he does not practice writing and reading with her, only speaking. If he were to practice reading and speaking with Alicia, she may improve her ability to read in English as well. Becoming familiar with linguistic structures of one language gives a person a strong background about how languages work in general. It is arguable that this understanding is transferrable across languages and could help a bilingual student like Alicia improve and excel in the L2.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore how small schools with few English Language Learners, like Freshwater Elementary School, address the needs of their language minority students and support them develop both Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Alicia was chosen as the subject of this case study for two reasons. The first was her demonstrated ability in Language Arts. The second was because she was one of three English Language Learners in the school and she was the oldest among them. Her age and language ability made her the best choice for this study.

Methodology:

I observed Alicia in her third grade classroom, usually during the first half of the day. I observed Alicia during one hour intervals. Generally, I observed her during her

Language Arts or Mathematics lessons. However, I have also observed her during school assemblies and interacting with peers on the playground. I also interviewed Alicia's teachers and Resource Specialist. I also conducted research on the area, school demographics, test scores, poverty level, and other relevant information.

Limitations:

Despite the fact that I was able to interview Alicia, her Resource Specialist, and her classroom teacher, I was unable to connect with Alicia's parents. The classroom teacher and the Resource Specialist stated that they had immense difficulty meeting with her parents, or even reaching them via telephone. There were other limitations as well. For example, I was unable to observe Alicia throughout an entire day. I was limited to certain times when I did not have commitments in my own classroom during my student teaching assignment. Alicia attended the elementary school connected with the middle school, but I was only able to observe her during her Language Arts and Mathematics lessons. It would have been interesting to observe her behavior and interactions during Social Studies and Science lessons as well, but I was unable to rearrange my teaching schedule at the middle school.

School Context

Freshwater Elementary School is located in Freshwater, a rural subdivision of the city of Eureka in Humboldt County, CA. It is a small school consisting of approximately 269 students. 88 percent of the student population at Freshwater Elementary School is white. Five percent identify as Latino, six percent are American Indian, one percent are

Asian, one percent is African American, and one percent had no response. The overwhelming majority of the students at Freshwater Elementary School are white. It is important to note that this information is one year old. It is also important to note that since Alicia and the two other English Language Learners are new to the school this year, they are not included in this information. In fact, the school reports that in 2011, there were no English Language Learners that attended Freshwater Elementary School. 28 percent of the students who attend Freshwater Elementary are eligible for free or reduced school lunch. Freshwater Charter Middle School, the junior high attached to Freshwater Elementary has a higher percentage of these students; 38 percent of Freshwater Middle School students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The state average for California is 52 percent (California Department of Education, 2011). Small farms surround the school and most of the students are bussed in from remote areas. There is a significant amount of poverty in the area; 23.2 percent of Humboldt County's children live in poverty (Faulkner, 2008).

The school's API scores are very good. In 2011, their Percent Proficient Target for English was 67.6 and their actual school wide score was 70.2. This means that over 70 percent of the student body performs proficiently in English. At the same time, only 58.3 percent of the socio-economically disadvantaged students and only 45.7 percent of students with disabilities performed proficiently on the standardized test in 2011 (California Department of Education, 2011). These data did not include that of any ELLs. Despite the fact that the school had a high percentage of proficient students, they would like to achieve a much higher score in this area this year.

Cummins refers to something called the “Fourth Grade Slump.” This refers to at risk students, those who are English Language Learners, of lower economic status, or both, who do well in Language Arts in the lower primary grades. These students usually perform at grade level, but when they reach the fourth grade, they fall behind consistently through to the secondary grades. This is because in the lower primary grades, there is much more emphasis placed on “the development of phonemic awareness” than on “vocabulary development and reading comprehension” (Hall, 2002). This means that these students may require additional and supplemental assistance in regard to vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Since Alicia received her lowest score on her CELDT in the Reading category, it would suggest that she may be in danger of falling into the fourth grade slump next year.

Student Data

Alicia is a third grader at Freshwater Charter Middle School. She was born in Mexico, but has lived in the United States since she was three years old. Her first language is Spanish and she says that her father practices Spanish with her at home. She says that her family watches television in Spanish, speaks Spanish and English in their home, and her father practices speaking with her while he helps her with her math homework. Her mother works at a doctor’s office and her father works in construction. Alicia demonstrates a satisfactory level of reading comprehension in Language Arts. Her most recent California English Language Development Test (CELDT) was taken in September of 2010. Her overall score was 479, which places her at the Intermediate

performance level. This score was taken from the following scores: Listening score (464), Speaking score (514), Reading score (450) and Writing score (490). Her Speaking performance level is Early Advanced. Her lowest score was in Reading, which placed her at the Early Intermediate performance level. She loves to read and I have observed her become extremely excited about Reading time at school. When given the opportunity to choose an activity after completing an assignment early, Alicia chooses to read. The only time I have observed her choose a different activity was when she had just finished the book she was reading and had nothing else to read.

Jessica Graff, Alicia's teacher, stated that Alicia is a fantastic student and a joy to have in the classroom. She explained that Alicia likes to participate in class, enjoys reading and writing, and that she plays well with her peers. Jessica has had very little contact with Alicia's parents; she says that she does not even have their phone number after all this time. She says that Alicia's strongest subject is Language Arts, but that she struggles with Mathematics. She is in the "red" reading group, which Jessica explained was one of three reading groups in the class. The readers in this group read books that are at or very slightly above grade level. She says that Alicia performs very well in this group and enjoys reading together.

This is congruent with what Alicia has told me herself. Alicia says that Art and Language Arts are her favorite subjects, but she also likes science. Her least favorite part about school is taking math tests. She stated, "It takes a lot of time for me to finish my math tests because there is a lot of noise in the classroom and I have to try really hard to work" (personal communication, 2011). Since she struggles in math and is an English Language Learner, she is affected more by background noise. While her peers

do not need to work as diligently on comprehension during tests in various content areas, Alicia does. Perhaps Alicia would benefit from taking tests in a more quiet area of the room.

Analysis

Alicia seems to be in the “intermediate fluency” stage of Krashen’s stages of Language Acquisition. During the intermediate fluency stage, ELLs will speak in sentences with few errors in syntax or vocabulary. Students can also demonstrate knowledge in many ways, including giving their opinion through debate and evaluation (Krashen, 1983). According to Krashen’s Monitor Hypothesis, language acquisition is central to the thinking process whereas actual learning is generally peripheral or auxiliary (Krashen, 1983). Therefore, language acquisition tends to be more organic in its development and learning content happens along the way, but needs to be addressed specifically through culturally responsive pedagogy.

There seems to be a lack of communication between Alicia’s family and the school. The Resource Specialist who also takes care of any ELLs in the school has given me information that does not match with what Alicia has told me. I was told that Alicia was born in the United States, does not require, nor does she receive, any extra help with English outside of her Language Arts class. Alicia told me that she was born in Mexico and did not move to the states until her five-year-old sister was born. That tells me that she moved here when she was approximately three years old. Alicia also told me that she has attended many different schools in the area. She told me that she does not have very many friends, but that “people at Freshwater Elementary School

were much nicer to [her] than the people at [her] previous schools. I pressed Alicia about this, but she seemed reluctant to elaborate. The only thing that she admitted in addition to the previous statement she made was this: "I like Ms. Graff. She's very a very nice teacher. Everyone is nice here." The Resource Specialist explained that since Alicia's CELDT scores were fairly high and she did not seem to need any help with English Language Acquisition that she did not require additional help from the school in that regard. However, it seems that Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) would assist Alicia with her academic vocabulary development. Alicia's CELDT scores were high, but that does not mean that she does not require additional and specialized assistance to continue her English language development. SDAIE is also known as Sheltered English instruction and "provides assistance to learners in the form of visuals, modified texts and assignments, and attention to their linguistic needs" (Echevarria & Graves, 2007. p.45). If the Resource Specialist were to strategically plan and modify classwork for Alicia, Alicia would be able to access the content much more easily, regardless of her English language development.

Some ways that this could be done is through the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP® (Short, Vogt, & Echevarria, 2008). The SIOP Model consists of eight separate components. These are as follows: "preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/ application, lesson delivery, and review/assessment" (Echevarria & Graves, 2007. p.45). Although Alicia is the only English Language Learner in the class, these aspects of the model can benefit all students in a variety of ways. For example, the SIOP® model emphasizes modeling and demonstration. According to Social Cognitive learning theory, students are able to

learn and develop understandings of concepts by watching demonstrations and modeling (Ormrod, 2009). By emphasizing visuals and experiential learning activities, English Language Learners can have access to rich, age appropriate content without the limitations imposed by their individual English language development levels. The SIOP® model also includes preparation and building background knowledge. This is closely aligned with Constructivist learning theories that suggest that learners develop meaningful knowledge constructions by connecting the new content with prior knowledge. Utilizing students' prior knowledge can help the students make meaningful connections between the content and their own lives (Richardson, 2003). This would be particularly useful to ELLs, who sometimes find themselves searching for meaning of complex academic language used in the classroom.

Despite the fact that Alicia's CELDT test placed her at Intermediate/Early Advanced levels, I found that there was some confusion during our conversations. During my interview with Alicia, she first told me that her L1 was English. When I rephrased the question to the following: "So, your first language was English? So when you were learning to talk, your parents were teaching you English?" Then she laughed and said, "No, I spoke Spanish first, but my mom also taught me some English. She taught me English when we moved here." I am not sure if the first way I asked the question was unclear or if she had difficulty understanding it due to a language barrier. Also, she told me that she cannot read Spanish, but can only speak it. However, Jessica informed me that one of the math worksheets she handed out in class had directions in both English and Spanish. Alicia read the directions out loud

beautifully in Spanish and several children began to crowd around her to hear her read them again.

Typically, Alicia does not share the fact that she knows Spanish with her classmates or anyone else. She was adamant that Jessica call her by a more “American” sounding name in class and did not want to talk about her ethnic identity in class. Jessica said that the fact that Alicia was willing to read aloud in Spanish was an incredible improvement to Alicia’s previous behavior regarding her ability to speak Spanish and her Latin American cultural heritage. She also said that Alicia was beaming when the students responded so positively about her abilities. This might have made a positive difference in regard to Alicia’s affective barrier that is discussed later in the paper.

As stated earlier, Alicia had hidden the fact that she speaks Spanish and came from another country. She hated being called by her real name and insisted on being called an “Americanized” version of it in class. She asked the teacher to please make her a new name placard for her desk as well. Jessica was disturbed by this, but complied with Alicia’s request. This is Alicia’s first year at Freshwater Elementary and therefore, Jessica is unaware of Alicia’s previous experiences at other schools. Perhaps her Spanish language skills were frowned upon and she felt ashamed. At the same time, this event proves that Alicia *can* read Spanish and thus misunderstood my question. I plan to discuss these misunderstandings with the Resource Specialist.

Personal Reflection

Alicia's aversion to expressing her ethnicity or allowing other students to know that she is bilingual suggests that much of the time, she experiences what Krashen refers to as the "Affective Filter" (Krashen, 1983). The affective filter is something that stops a student from learning because emotion, anxiety or nervousness takes over. There is inner concern about one's abilities. It could be argued that Alicia is negatively affected by her need to hide her identity. There are many things that Jessica does in the classroom to help Alicia feel comfortable and proud of her culture. For example, Jessica had told Alicia and the entire class about her experiences living in Guatemala and shares the Spanish language from time to time. Jessica also told me that in the beginning of the year, when Alicia asked for her name to be changed, Jessica tried to encourage her to keep it and told her how pretty she thought her name was. It seems that Jessica is doing the best she can to make Alicia feel good about herself. It may take time for Alicia to become comfortable with herself. I would like to know more about Alicia's prior experiences with schooling and how these have affected the way she experiences school now.

Freshwater Elementary School is rather small in comparison to other schools in the area. Since there are quite few ELLs among their students, it makes sense that they may not possess certain resources or implement certain ESL programs in their school. The Resource Specialist has her BCLAD Certificate and therefore serves all the students with IEPs, 504 plans, and who are ELLs at the same time. Since there have been budget cuts across the board in California, many resources that she used to enjoy are now gone. She has a diminutive support staff, but carries quite a heavy load at the school; 16% of the student body has a documented learning disability. This can be said

of many schools throughout the United States, but is considerably high. She also serves the adjoining Freshwater Charter Middle School with the same support staff. The Resource Specialist would like to test Alicia again for her CELDT to see if there are any changes in her score and to re-assess her education plan or lack thereof. I believe that this would be an excellent idea, especially because Alicia has expressed difficulty in content areas such as Mathematics due to background noise in the classroom. I also experienced some confusion with her during the interview. Despite the fact that Alicia has a high aptitude for Language Arts, she may still need extra support to further develop her CALP as she progresses through school, especially considering the possibility of a fourth grade slump. Despite the fact that Alicia cites reading as one of her favorite activities, I believe that Alicia would benefit from reading support in the form of Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English. It is imperative to assist her with the development of her academic vocabulary at this stage of her education. It could help her successfully avoid the “fourth grade slump” and go on to continue excelling in her studies. Practicing and further developing Alicia’s reading comprehension will ensure that she transitions well into the higher primary grades and earns higher scores on her CELDT and other tests.

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Allyn & Bacon

Appendix A— Initial Interview Questions

The following questions were asked of her teacher and Resource Specialist:

1. Is Alicia an effective communicator in Spanish? Is she read to and spoken to in Spanish at home?
2. What are her short term and long-term English Language and Spanish Language goals?
3. What kind of ELL program is used in Alicia's case?
4. What is Alicia's comfortability with her ethnic identity?
5. What types of books does she read and is she at grade level with her reading?

These questions were directed to Alicia:

1. How many languages do you speak?
2. What language do you usually speak at home?
3. Where were you born?
4. How were you treated when you first came to school as an English Learner?
5. Which is your favorite subject in school? Why is it your favorite?
6. Are there things about school that you would like to change?
7. What kinds of things do you do when you leave class for English help?