

Adaptations for English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Linguistic and Instructional Accommodations

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Abstract

While many teachers and teacher educators in the United States K-12 system acknowledge that the English language learners (ELLs) in our schools need modifications and accommodations to help them succeed in school, few attempt to parse out how different types of accommodations may affect learning in the mainstream classroom, specifically linguistic and instructional accommodations. In this study, 156 ESL (English as a second language) and mainstream teachers were asked about their knowledge of and level of self-efficacy concerning linguistic and instructional accommodations. Results showed that, while most participants acknowledged that the distinction is important, many were not comfortable defining or implementing these specific types of accommodations. This article is an attempt to examine how mainstream teachers feel about these two different types of accommodations needed by ELLs. The authors attempt to examine how teachers view both instructional and linguistic accommodations and establish surface level validity for this distinction and document the need for teachers, especially mainstream teachers, to be aware of and actively design lessons that include these separate accommodations.

Introduction

This article outlines the results of a study investigating how teachers in the United States view accommodations provided to English language learners (ELLs) in mainstream (non-ESL) classrooms. It represents a first step in acknowledging the importance of distinguishing between linguistic and instructional accommodations that may (or may not) be provided to ELLs by their mainstream teachers. The context for many American teachers is changing. While, in the past, many of their students were native English speakers, the demographics of the typical student in American schools, especially in the Southeastern portion of the country, has been rapidly changing (Douglass Horsford & Sampson, 2013). While many mainstream teachers (elementary, middle and high school

teachers without a specialty designation such as ESL or Special Education) will have ELLs in their classrooms, very few have any additional preparation to help them work with this growing population (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008; Goldenberg, 2008; Sampson & Collins, 2012). The work I do as part of my university position often involves providing professional development for and completing observations of mainstream teachers who work with ELLs in rural schools in the United States. The following vignette describes one such school visit.

As I go into the mainstream class to observe two teachers teach a class of mixed native English speakers and non-native English speakers, I am excited to be here because I've heard great things about this rural elementary school and the work they've done integrating English language learners (ELLs) into the mainstream. In fact, during the observation, the interaction between the ESL teacher and the mainstream teacher is so refined that I have difficulty distinguishing the ELLs from the native English speakers. I observe several other classrooms where the teachers are equally adept at their co-teaching model, but I still walk away from each observation with a sense of discomfort, that something is wrong beneath the surface of these classrooms.

Each of the teachers is an expert in her field, executing the classroom activities in a professional manner. As mentioned before, the ESL teacher is fully integrated into the classroom, not side-lined as happens too frequently in misinterpretations of the co-teaching model. I see cooperative learning, Word Walls, student work displayed in the rooms, and manipulatives used to aid learning. However, after a day of observations I realize that, while I have seen numerous instructional accommodations, I have not seen very many linguistic accommodations focused on the ELLs in the classrooms. When I ask teachers about this lack of linguistic accommodations for ELLs, they respond that all their children have language issues because of high rates of poverty in the district. Both native and non-native English speakers benefit from the same instructional strategies.

As a result of this observation that took place during a research study on co-teaching, my colleague and I began to ask K-12 teachers (mainstream and ESL) about their awareness and knowledge of instructional and linguistic accommodations. This study is premised on the assumption that there is a difference between instructional accommodations and linguistic accommodations provided by teachers in the classroom and that both, linguistic and instructional accommodations, are needed for ELLs to be successful in the mainstream classroom. This article is an exploration of teachers' understandings about the differences between instructional and linguistic accommodations and the possibility that this difference could be used to help close the achievement gap between ELLs and their native English speaking peers in American K-12 schools. It includes a synopsis of surveys and discussions and addresses the connections and disconnections that mainstream teachers feel regarding different types of accommodations provided for ELLs in the mainstream classroom. The purpose of the data presented in this article is to examine how mainstream teachers view different types of accommodations and provide a rationale for a pedagogical distinction between instructional and linguistic accommodations.

English Learners in the Mainstream Classroom

Over the past few decades, the number of ELLs in American schools has grown rapidly and there is a high need for all teachers to be prepared to work with ELLs (De Jong, 2013). Many parts of the United States have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and these adoptions have ramped up expectations in many areas for all teachers, especially those who work with ELLs (Santos, Darling-Hammond & Cheuk, 2012). The impact of CCSS can be seen in every area of education from testing to teacher preparation, and this influence is equally powerful in the education of language minority students (Santos, Darling-Hammond & Cheuk, 2012). For years we have sought to reduce the achievement gap that exists between ELLs and their native English speaking peers (Goldenberg, 2008; Sampson & Collins, 2012), but the introduction of CCSS and the subsequent testing systems that accompany them make this gap reduction even more imperative.

Because of the impact of federal legislation in the United States, most ELLs spend the majority of their academic day with mainstream teachers (non-ESL teachers) as their primary instructional providers. However, these teachers are often either not prepared or underprepared to work with this population of students. Especially since many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), there has been an emphasis placed on academic language that impacts entire classrooms, not just ELLs. This increased emphasis on academic oral and written language has challenged mainstream teachers more than in past years.

We know that ELLs will spend the majority of their academic day with mainstream teachers. However, only a few states (i.e., California, Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania and New York) require English as a Second Language (ESL) coursework for all their teachers (Sampson & Collins, 2012). Lucas and Grinberg (2008) found that in 2000 approximately 74% of mainstream teachers had little or no preparation for working with ELLs. Of those that had participated in professional development related to ESL practices, most had only a few hours of preparation. Sampson and Collins (2012) reported that ELLs score significantly below their native English-speaking peers on NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) tests. Hence, there is a great need for mainstream teachers to be better prepared to work with ELLs and work more effectively to ameliorate the impact of learning content in a second language.

EL versus Dialectally Different?

In the elementary school practicing the co-teaching model I asked both ESL teachers and mainstream teachers how they accommodated the needs of the ELLs in their classrooms. Typically they outlined their carefully selected instructional accommodations, which they implemented with success. The mainstream teachers raved about the increased sense of efficacy they felt while working closely with their ESL teacher partners. The ESL teachers commented often about how they felt they were making a true difference in the mainstream classroom with the help of their content-area colleagues. Yet, when I asked how ELLs' linguistic needs were being met, I was redirected to the instructional accommodations made for all the students in the classroom. Nearly every teacher responded that all the students in the class benefited from the accommodations, without

any linguistic differentiation, because the student population of the school was so socioeconomically disadvantaged that even the native English speakers did not effectively use academic English. However, is this a valid argument?

In their study, Logan and Petscher (2010) found that when language-risk (ESL) and poverty-risk (non-ESL, high poverty) groups were compared in curriculum-based measures (CBM), the language-risk group consistently demonstrated lower starting points and lower growth rates over a one year period. De Jong and Harper (2011) found that when teachers implemented accommodations, accommodations that focused on comprehensibility were more likely to be used than accommodations that were designed to specifically provide second language support.

Within the school I observed, the principal reported that the gap between the ELLs and native speakers persisted. If the well-executed instructional accommodations were not being differentiated for ELLs, then were they simply raising the quality of instruction for all students but still leaving ELLs with a linguistic gap that would continue to hinder their academic progress, keeping them from excelling to their fullest potential? In fact, the persistent achievement gap between ELLs and their native speaking peers has been noted by many different authors, and Wong-Fillmore and Snow specifically noted that, “A thorough grounding in educational linguistics would support teachers’ understandings overall, and in particular teaching literacy skills and working with English language learners” (p. 4, 2000). In other studies, researchers have concluded that, in testing situations, the type of accommodation assigned to ELLs does make a difference in their achievement (Kopriva, Hipolito-Delgado & Cameron, 2007). Hence, we can conclude that the type of accommodations provided to ELLs does matter. Teachers cannot assume that providing any type of accommodation will be effective.

Instructional and Linguistic Accommodations

ESL professionals often group both instructional and linguistic accommodations in the same general category when we work in self-contained ESL classrooms. When we prepare ESL professionals who are well-versed in linguistics, structural and applied grammar, and other language concepts, we assume that they will distinguish when an instructional accommodation is needed and when a linguistic accommodation is needed. We expect them to provide both types, simultaneously if needed, as a best practice for ELLs. However, for mainstream teachers without such background in the structure of languages, this difference is often lost. Many times, mainstream teachers who work with ELLs are focused on other priorities. Reeves (2006) noted that mainstream teachers are focused on a chronic lack of time to address the needs of ELLs and an intensification of workload related to the needs of ELLs. She also found that teachers in her study were ambivalent about pursuing professional development related to working with ELLs, even though they perceived they were not prepared. Polat (2010) also found that teachers felt unprepared to teach ELLs even though they acknowledged that ELLs spent most of their academic day under their instruction. Polat (2010) further notes that a submersion model of instruction is predominant in many schools and recommends that schools and colleges of education take on a more active role in preparing preservice teachers to effectively work with ELLs.

Harvey and Teemant (2012) who investigated teacher perceptions of the roles of ESL teachers, noted a need for improved teacher knowledge of second language acquisition. In her literature review of research in multilingual education, Pettit (2011) found that inservice teachers are inadequately prepared specifically in the area of second language acquisition knowledge. This finding is consistent with de Jong and Harper (2005) who argued that too many mainstream teachers feel that ELLs are adequately served through generalized best practices in teaching.

One of the most common mainstream teacher support models for working with ELLs is the SIOP model (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2013). This model focuses on lesson plan adaption for ELLs and specifically includes the development of both language and content objectives. However, this is where the distinction between language and content tends to end. Although the model certainly includes both linguistic and instructional accommodations, they are not specifically addressed as such.

Because ELLs are learning both language and content, teachers must provide accommodations and interventions that address both sides of this learning process. Cummins (2000) was one of the first researchers to ask teachers to examine the content and language demands of classrooms. His argument went something like this. When content demands are high, language must be context-embedded to reduce the linguistic burden placed on ELLs. Unless ELLs learn the language, their mastery of content will be hampered. Hence, all content learning must include accommodations for language and linguistic support that go beyond instructional accommodations.

What is an accommodation?

All accommodations alter how content and language are taught, made accessible, and assessed. Accommodations, in general, can be viewed as interventions that address the specific skills and weaknesses in an individual student. According to Abedi (2001), accommodations are intended to “level the playing field” (p. 2) and to make language less of a factor when measuring performance. Abedi and his colleagues also concluded that, in large scale assessments, the most effective accommodations were those that include linguistic modification of test questions, leading us to believe that specific linguistic accommodations are critical to ELLs’ academic development. Additionally, Abedi et al. argued that a true accommodation is one that levels the playing field for ELLs but does not give them an advantage over other students in classes.

What is the difference between an instructional and a linguistic accommodation?

Instructional accommodations specifically pertain to how content is taught, made accessible, and assessed. These are accommodations that have a direct impact on how content is manipulated and taught in classrooms. Every day in teacher education programs, preservice teachers are taught how to alter and tweak their instructional practices to suit different types of learners in their classrooms. Mainstream, content area teachers are focused on learning processes, skills and concepts within a content area, relying on a student’s preexisting command of the language to assist in that learning process. Most accommodations and modification taught to mainstream teachers are planned with the assumption that the student in question is a native speaker of English.

Some examples of instructional accommodations would be the targeted use of cooperative learning, perhaps a think-pair-share activity to review vocabulary related to new science terms or a jigsaw activity to introduce the characters in a new novel. Another common instructional accommodation would be to link a student's prior knowledge to the new lessons that will be covered that day. For example, a 10th grade classroom may engage in a discussion of the war in Iraq to introduce issues surrounding World War I. Third graders may be asked to brainstorm about what their favorite food smells like prior to the introduction of the concept of gas as a state of matter. Many learning strategies that are taught to students would also qualify as instructional accommodations, especially when they are linked to specific types of content. These could include teaching students memory strategies to learn new vocabulary, methods of note-taking, and summarization techniques. All of these strategies and accommodations would involve direct interaction with the teacher's methodology of teaching content, regardless of the language proficiency of his/her students.

Linguistic accommodations, however, involve the direct manipulation of language so that theories of second language acquisition can be integrated into classroom practice. While instructional accommodations take into consideration generic student differences, linguistic accommodations involve language supports that address the specific linguistic characteristics of different ELLs. While some instructional and linguistic accommodations overlap, a linguistic accommodation is implemented specifically to ameliorate a language difference. Any overlap would be intricately planned and not occur by chance.

Some examples of linguistic accommodations would be the use of simplified English to introduce content or assess students' mastery of content, directions that are read aloud to benefit students who have more advanced listening skills than reading skills. Translation of directions would also be considered a linguistic accommodation. Audio-taping a lesson or using clarification techniques such as rephrasing could also be considered linguistic accommodations. All these strategies and accommodations take into consideration ELLs' specific language needs in addition to recognition of their content needs. According to Davison's research, "An ideal collaboration between ESL and content-area teachers requires the integration of content-based ESL teaching and ESL-conscious content teaching that is, systematic planned language development, not just the inclusion of ESL students in the ongoing activities of the mainstream classroom" (2006, p. 457).

The study

In this study we investigated how mainstream and ESL teachers in the United States view this distinction and whether or not they value it. Data was collected to investigate what mainstream teachers understood about instructional and linguistic accommodations. Do they acknowledge a difference? Is this an important distinction? Do they feel that they can distinguish between the two types of accommodations and, if so, can they provide examples of each type? We also hoped to provide a surface level validation for addressing this distinction at the pedagogical level of teacher preparation. Please note that in the following descriptions, some numbers may not add up to exactly 156 because participants were allowed to skip questions.

Participants

In all, this study included 156 participants, most of whom are mainstream teachers (102 mainstream teachers, 22 ESL teachers, and 29 preservice mainstream teachers). Participants for this study were recruited from a pool of teachers who are already participating in some sort of ESL professional development at the local university. The majority had participated in a 10-hour online module that introduced them to ESL concepts and strategies. These teachers, all from North Carolina, were predominantly at the elementary education level (n=46). Other participants came from across the K-12 educational spectrum, with small numbers of participants in other areas of education including secondary levels (High School, n=13 and Middle School, n=25), and an Other category (n=22).

Data and analysis

Data from all participants was collected via an online survey instrument. Basic descriptive statistics were used to analyze data from the online survey. Questions from the online survey are in Appendix 1. All 156 participants had access to the online survey, but a much smaller group of participants (10 ESL teachers) was chosen to participate in the online discussion. This group of K-12 ESL teachers was chosen to participate separately in the discussion board to delve deeper into the perceived differences between linguistic and instructional accommodations based on the pre-study assumption that this group may be more familiar with the distinction.

The discussion board data was analyzed by theme. Because these data were collected via an online discussion board, it was relatively easy to identify themes across the discussion. Participants tended to group their discussions by theme-based threads. In addition, the researchers cross-checked the threads for consistency across themes. In the online discussion, participants were asked to explain how they understood the difference between linguistic and instructional accommodations. They were then asked to give examples of each.

Results

The results of the data are reported below.

Participants reported the following level of knowledge regarding ESL instruction in general

- 2% felt that they know as much as their ESL teacher
- 42% know more than most of the other teachers they work with
- 40% thought they knew as much as they needed to
- 14% reported that they need to know more
- 2% reported their level of knowledge as unacceptable for their work.

Of the participants reporting, 92% said that it is important for teachers to know the difference between an instructional and a linguistic accommodation, but many are not sure (35%) or do not know (24%) the difference between an instructional and linguistic accommodation. A small number of participants cannot (4%) define or aren't sure

(11%) how to define the term 'accommodation.' Twenty-three percent could not give an example of an instructional accommodation. Forty-six percent would not be able to give an example of a linguistic accommodation.

When given a definition of an instructional accommodation, 8% reported that they would still find it difficult or not be able to implement such an accommodation. About half (51%) reported they could implement an instructional accommodation with confidence. Forty-one percent reported they could implement an instructional accommodation most of the time in their classes.

When given a definition of a linguistic accommodation, 20% reported that they would still have difficulty with or not be able to implement a linguistic accommodation. Thirty-five percent reported that they could implement a linguistic accommodation with confidence, and 46% reported that they could implement a linguistic accommodation most of the time.

Results from the discussion board data were more detailed, although participants were not given definitions of either instructional or linguistic accommodations. We believe this level of detail and specificity resulted from the fact that our discussion board participants were ESL teachers or mainstream teachers completing a second licensure area in ESL. Like the online data, these participants agreed that it is important for teachers to be able to distinguish between an instructional and a linguistic accommodation. These participants immediately recognized that linguistic accommodations would reduce the linguistic burden that ELLs face when learning new content. Many gave excellent examples that directly related to language, including adjustments to speech patterns, use of bilingual materials, accent reduction (on the part of the teacher), and repetition. They also connected linguistic accommodations with scaffolded instruction that would help ELLs be more academically competitive in a mainstream classroom.

Some comments from the discussion board participants included the following related to linguistic accommodations. Some participants immediately saw linguistic accommodations as reductions in the linguistic burden that ELLs face.

- *A linguistic accommodation allows an ESL student to better access the target language. For example, a teacher could use a nonlinguistic representation of a vocabulary word. The accommodation helps the student's comprehension.*
- *A linguistic accommodation is one where the language of a subject is minimized.*
- *Would a linguistic accommodation be an accommodation that would ease the language barrier?*

Others saw linguistic accommodations more as ways to address language but did not see them as a method of addressing content. Some saw linguistic accommodations as a subset of instructional accommodations.

- *I would say that a linguistic accommodation would be an accommodation to help a student who could do the work academically but who had not mastered the language, the academics being taught.*

- *In linguistic accommodations, it is the way the material is presented to students in reference to dictation, accent and conversation.*
- *I would say that linguistic accommodations are a subset of general instructional accommodations.*
- *I think that a linguistic accommodation would be when you change your language or vocabulary to help a person to understand what you may be saying.*
- *A linguistic accommodation is when you adjust your speech, patterns of your speech, length, basically any adaptation to your speech that is made because of the people around you.*
- *Linguistic accommodations are simplifying language used when speaking with a language learner so the teacher would speak slower, repeat instructions, provide dictionaries, provide definition to new words.*

Here participants define linguistic accommodations as specifically related to language and linguistic patterns used in the classroom. A few have pointed out that they see linguistic accommodations as those that reduce the linguistic burden, and we feel that this is the more accurate view of a linguistic accommodation as in the following comments.

- *Linguistic accommodations help ELLs understand the language of instruction and accelerate the learning of both subject matter and English.*
- *Linguistic accommodation is a strategy use to level the playing field for students who struggle with the academic language. This could be adaptations to verbal interactions, wording on worksheets, etc.*

In a few cases, participants tended to look at all accommodations as those provided on a typical standardized test.

An accommodation generally refers to a change in the way a test is administered or a change in the testing environment. Direct linguistic accommodations change the language of the test administration...indirect linguistic accommodations help ELLs process language more easily (i.e., multiple test sessions). Instructional accommodations would be more of having a written form of the directions for students to see.

Discussion

From the results we can see that this topic is one that is important to teachers but one that, perhaps, they may not have given much thought to. Although the distinction seems to be intuitive to many of our ESL teachers, mainstream teachers seem to have more difficulty in thinking in more specific categories of accommodation. Indeed, even our ESL teacher/participants often viewed linguistic accommodations as only having to do with listening and speaking aspects of the language. Additionally, when they are prompted to think of different distinctions among general accommodations, some have difficulty feeling confident in their ability to implement different types of accommodations.

Over 80% of our participants reported that their level of knowledge of ESL instruction was either superior or acceptable. However, many respondents either do not understand the difference between an instructional and a linguistic accommodation (24%) or have an unsteady understanding (35%) of the difference. These are teachers who may feel that they already have an adequate understanding of ESL methodology and may not seek out any additional professional development. Additionally, they acknowledge the importance of the distinction but are not sure about it. This dichotomy points to a need for further investigation of this difference and perhaps more professional development for both mainstream and ESL teachers.

We see instructional accommodations as strategies that are used specifically to make content more accessible or more readily retained. However, linguistic accommodations are those that specifically reduce the linguistic burden and allow ESL students to more readily access not only the language in the classroom but the content as well. Instructional accommodations could be used with any student to help them access content, but linguistic accommodations are designed and implemented specifically with ELLs in mind.

Many in the ESL field have heard ESL-friendly strategies described as ‘just good teaching,’ but several authors including De Jong and Harper (2007) acknowledge that this statement is an overgeneralization. We cannot simply expect mainstream teachers to apply instructional strategies to ELLs and expect the same positive results we hope to see with native English speaking students. This approach ignores the very real linguistic needs of ELLs in mainstream classrooms. We must consciously separate linguistic aid from instructional aid so that mainstream teachers can begin to surgically apply each as needed.

Mainstream teachers should be made more aware of this distinction so that they can effectively integrate both types of accommodations into their instruction. Perhaps because mainstream teachers are not comfortable with creating linguistic accommodations, they are not as likely to incorporate them into their classrooms. ESL teachers need to be aware of the distinction so that they can explicitly include them in their interactions with mainstream teachers and in co-teaching environments. ESL teachers in co-teaching environments often walk a fine line in terms of their ability to actively use their expertise in the mainstream classroom (Pappamihiel, 2012). If mainstream teachers were more aware of the benefit of linguistic accommodations, ESL teachers might feel freer to push for their inclusion in mainstream classrooms. Hence we feel that the data collected provide social validity for the distinction between instructional and linguistic accommodations for ELLs in mainstream classrooms.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This article represents an examination of the distinction between instructional and linguistic accommodations and how teachers may operationalize this distinction. In this article we have established that there is a difference between these two types of accommodations. Our participants acknowledged that this is an important distinction but were not necessarily comfortable in being able to implement each separately or distinguish between the two.

Further research is needed to see how often linguistic accommodations are implemented by mainstream and ESL teachers, even if they do not fully understand the distinction. It is possible that mainstream teachers are implementing linguistic accommodations without truly understanding that they are doing this, as an ESL teacher might. Additionally, further research is needed into how effective specific linguistic accommodations are with ELLs in mainstream classrooms.

Given the fact that ELLs are often unsuccessful in the mainstream classroom, each and every teacher they come in contact with needs to be more attuned to specific accommodations that can help reduce the linguistic barriers that hamper their academic achievement. In many ways, the simple fact that mainstream teachers now understand the need for any accommodations is a success story, but we must continue to strive to fine tune our implementation of such accommodations.

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