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Confronting Barriers with Middle School Language Learners:  
Helping Hispanics Learn To Navigate Mainstream US Culture

By

Shinju Flynn

CST 411

Fall 2008

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Addressed to: Portsmouth Middle School:

### **Introduction**

For the past few weeks I have had the opportunity to observe middle school students, grades 5 and 6, through the School Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) after-school program at your school. I have worked closely with Hispanic students within this program and have noticed the difficulties some of them have in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding the English language. While there are specific constraints within the classroom environment that limit Hispanic students' education, I believe the school can address some of the larger issues outside of the classroom that impact these students' transition of into mainstream US culture and English language use.

To that end, I offer a proposal to improve the English Language Learner's (ELL) program currently in place by adding a training program for teachers that would more specifically address the needs of Hispanic immigrant students with certain aspects of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol approach, which has been adopted and known to be effective for immigrants in schools throughout the US (Short, 2000). This program would add to teachers' awareness of Hispanic culture and offer a variety of strategies known to be effective in helping immigrant students acquire the English language and academic skills at the same time. I would also like to offer a proposal for an expansion of the current "back to school" events with flexible alternatives of how Hispanic parents can get involved in their child's schooling. This would offer parents the opportunity to interact with their child, to learn English, and to create a close relationship with the school. I believe that both of these programs should be considered because they could be beneficial in reducing the specific problems within the classroom environment such as the lack of interactions between the Hispanic English Language Learners

(ELL) or Hispanic immigrant students and the non-Hispanic students that contribute to the limitations of the Hispanic immigrant student's education of learning and utilizing the English language. This proposal will be broken down into two sections: The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol and the Parental Involvement component. The SIOP section will include teacher requirements, components of the SIOP, implementation of the program, and the rationale for using this method. The Parental Involvement component will include the parental involvement program, rationale for using this method, and ways of overcoming obstacles that may arise from implementing this program.

### **Proposal**

I propose a training program for teachers and to foster alternate ways for parents to get involved with their child's schooling with the interest of reducing the language barrier for Hispanic ELL's. I will be introducing aspects of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol that I believe would be beneficial for the Hispanic immigrant students in learning English (Echevarria, Short, & Power, 2006). I will explain the details for the method and process of implementing this instructional approach throughout this paper. I will then propose flexible ways for parents to get involved with their child's schooling that have been effective in other schools throughout the US.

#### **Part 1: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol**

The current ELL program solely focuses on language learning without helping the Hispanic students achieve the academic skills required of their grade level. I have observed students that are academically behind because their lack of English language is not addressed as well as it should be or because academic subjects are not integrated into language learning classes. Thus, I would like to propose some aspects of the Sheltered Instruction Observation

Protocol (SIOP) based on Echevarria, Short, & Powers (2006) study of its positive impact on language learners in schools throughout the US. Sheltered Instruction is a teaching approach that integrates the academic subject with English language learning (Short, 2000). It benefits all teachers because it advocates strategies for second language and mainstream classrooms (Short, 2000). This would benefit Hispanic students because they would be able to make the transition from their language learning class on how the English language is used in “academic tasks and routine classroom activities” to mainstream classrooms (Short, 2000, p. 20). The method for implementing the teachers training program is based on a variety of practices that have been effective in other schools throughout the US (Echevarria, Short, & Power, 2006). I will explain the requirements that teachers must fulfill as part of the training program, aspects of the SIOP that will be covered and taught in the program, how it will be implemented and carried out by school authorities.

### Teacher Requirements

The Sheltered Instruction training program for teachers would require the school to nominate and possibly hire an educational expert on the models of the SIOP. The educational expert would be responsible for holding and leading at least three meetings to thoroughly educate the teachers on specific aspects of the SIOP, which I will later discuss, and to make certain that the teachers reach a common understanding of the model (Echevarria et al., 2006). The education expert is expected to evaluate and give either written or oral feedback to teachers on their implementation of the SIOP model into their classrooms at least four times throughout the school year. The educational expert must also be willing to communicate to the principal and teachers throughout the school year via email and be willing to attend several reunion meetings throughout the school year (Echevarria et al., 2006).

### SIOP Components

The Sheltered Instruction approach consists of thirty items grouped into eight categories that are necessary for English language learners: a) Preparation, b) Building Background, c) Comprehensible Input, d) Strategies, e) Interaction, f) Practice/Application, g) Lesson Delivery, and h) Review/Assessment (Echevarria, et al., 2006). The teachers training program will cover the last six categories of this model as they are relevant to the needs of the Hispanic, English language learners. The following provides an explanation of the six categories in the SIOP model (Echevarria et al., 2006):

#### 1. Comprehensible Input

- a. Use speech that is appropriate for the students' level of comprehension. For example, teachers could speak at a slower rate, enunciate words clearly, and use simple sentences for Hispanics that are beginners in learning English.
- b. Explain academic tasks clearly. This requires the teacher to choose words carefully to make the subject matter comprehensible for the Hispanic immigrant student learning English.
- c. Use a variety of techniques in teaching the content material such as through hands-on activities, demonstrations, modeling, and gestures. Oftentimes I noticed in my observations that the teachers will call upon someone that speaks Spanish to translate for Hispanic ELL's. If teachers are to use other means of conveying what they are trying to say by drawing it out visually, for example, the Hispanic ELL will gradually be able to pick up on parts of the English language.

#### 2. Strategies

- a. Provide opportunities for students to use strategies in assignments and discussions of problem solving, debating skills, summarizing, categorizing, evaluating, and self-monitoring. For example, assign homework to students on summarizing a book chapter by chapter.
- b. Use scaffolding techniques which is providing an appropriate amount of support for Hispanic students and then gradually giving students the responsibility to learn the subject matter on their own or with little support.
- c. Use a variety of question types such as analytical and interpretative questions to promote higher-order thinking. Roessingh's (2006) study explains the importance of teachers holding high expectations for language learners so that they feel that their teachers want them succeed and think that they are capable of doing so.

### 3. Interaction

- a. Provide frequent opportunities for students to interact with teachers and between English-speaking students on the lesson concepts. Ask them to elaborate their responses with questions such as "Can you explain that further?" or "Why do you believe that?"
- b. Consistently provide enough waiting time for students to respond to questions or in discussion.
- c. Give students the opportunity to ask for clarifications on lesson concepts or instructions.

### 4. Practice/Application

- a. Give activities to students that require them to apply the lesson concepts such as math and language knowledge. For example, a math activity that requires them to add and subtract in English.
  - b. Provide students with activities that incorporate all language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For example, a project based on reading a newspaper article and tying it to a news report on the television with an oral presentation.
5. Lesson Delivery
- a. Engaging students about 90-100% of the time.
  - b. Similar to what was stated above of incorporating scaffolding when teaching lesson concepts, pace the lesson appropriately according to the student's ability level.
6. Review/Evaluation
- a. Provide written and oral feedback to student's regularly on their participation and use of the English language.
  - b. Perform evaluations of student comprehension and language learning.

*Program Implementation*

The teachers whether they are English language teachers or not are required to attend the meetings as part of the training program. This may be an issue for some teachers depending on the time and day of the meetings, but the school could offer incentives for teachers to attend by adding a potluck dinner to the meeting or giving them extra pay. The teachers will be expected to participate and practice strategies of the SIOP within the meetings. They will also be responsible for evaluating themselves and writing reflections on how they are implementing the



SIOP model into their classrooms (Echevarria et al., 2006). Their implementation of the SIOP model will be recorded on a video camera three times throughout the school year, which will be evaluated by the educational expert.

### Rationale

The results of Echevarria, Short, and Power's (2006) study show that the SIOP model has been effective for English Language Learners. The SIOP had positive effects on ELL's academic literacy skills that are necessary to succeed in school (Echevarria et al., 2006). There were significant improvements in ELL's writing after implementing the SIOP (Echevarria et al., 2006). Unlike the ELL program that varies between schools and does not provide specific guidelines for teachers, the SIOP has been effective because it provides the necessary guidelines for teachers on how to approach and help ELL's (Echevarria et al., 2006).

Other studies and theories also support aspects of the SIOP model that should be effective for immigrant students, including Hispanic ELL's (Kim, 1988; Shi, 2006; Gudykunst, 2005; Roessingh, 2006; & Stodolska, 2008). Kim's (1988) integrative theory argues that a person's ability to communicate depends on their level of participation and absorption of the US culture. Thus, it is important and beneficial for Hispanic ELL's to interact with English-speaking students and teachers so they can learn and familiarize themselves with the patterns, styles, and consistencies of the US culture (Kim, 1988; Gudykunst, 2005; & Shi, 2006). Shi (2006) explains how new or recent immigrants, including Hispanics, can adapt to the language and US culture if they achieve cross-cultural adaptation, which is allowing for reciprocation or a two-way process of interaction to take place. Besides the need for Hispanic ELL's to interact with English-speaking students, it is also vital that teachers give feedback on any areas where they can improve or to let them know that they are showing signs of progress in learning English, which is

part of the SIOP model (Roessingh, 2006). Roessingh's (2006) study explained how ELL's appreciated and trusted their teachers if they were given feedback because they believed that they were capable of academic success. This further supports the need and benefits of implementing aspects of the SIOP model for Hispanic ELL's.

This proposal of a training program for teachers on implementing aspects of the SIOP may gain mixed reactions from the school board and individual teachers. An issue as mentioned before may be the time and commitment required of teachers to attend these meetings. I would suggest that the educational expert and teachers collaborate on setting up times and days that work for both of them. The school board may be reluctant on using their funds to hire an educational expert and on the costs of starting-up another program besides the ELL program, but the benefits may outweigh the costs in the long term. Since Hispanic students make up about half of the school population, I believe it would be beneficial for teachers, students, and the reputation of the school to expand upon their existing programs for Hispanic ELL's so there can be room for possible improvements to take place. I do not expect the school to adopt all of the aspects mentioned above of the SIOP model or to abide strictly by the rules of the training program required of teachers, but I do hope that parts of it does serve to be of use for the school. My intent of making this proposal is not to place blame on teachers for their strategies and approaches used in the classroom towards Hispanic ELL's but to offer practices that are known to be effective in hopes of assisting the Hispanic ELL's. This leads to my next proposal of increasing the involvement of Hispanic parents with personal tactics and through additional parental involvement programs besides the traditional "back to school" night workshops that are currently in place.

## Part 2: Parental Involvement Component

Parental involvement programs allows for parents to can take an active role in their child's education and provide the means for them to succeed academically in school. Parental involvement programs can range from "promoting the role of education in the home to the actual role of team decision-maker in policy, curriculum, and instructional issues" (Sosa, 1997, p. 103). I will be presenting an overview on the benefits and drawbacks of implementing parental involvement programs. I will then explain how the parental involvement program can be carried out with the intent of reducing the barriers that may deter parents from participating in such programs.

### Parental Involvement Program

The school can take the following steps, which are effective strategies practiced by other schools, to bring in a greater population of Hispanic parents:

1. Get to know the Hispanic community. The school could direct teachers and staff that are bilingual in English and Spanish to create a relationship with the Hispanic community of the students (Sosa, 1997). For example, teachers could attend Hispanic events such as fiesta's to bring awareness of programs available for them to get involved with school events and activities for their child.
2. Use fliers in Spanish, telephone calls and emails to parents (Sobel & Kugler, 2007). This would require a group of staff workers bilingual in Spanish and English. It may be more convincing and personal if a Spanish-speaking teacher could made the calls and emails to the parents of the Hispanic ELL's.
3. Post notices in local, Spanish newspapers and distribute fliers in Hispanic restaurants, Hispanic markets, or other Hispanic community venues (Sobel & Kugler, 2007).

4. Personalize invitations for formal events (Sosa, 1997). Parents are more likely to open letters that are personally addressed to them by their child's teachers or someone closely associated with their child than if it is from the school (Sobel & Kugler, 2007).

### Rationale

Parental involvement programs have been known to be effective for immigrants and English language learner students as it allows for parents to work closely with their child and keep them in line of academic achievement (Sosa, 1997; Schechter, Ippolito, & Rashkovsky, 2007). Schechter, Ippolito, & Rashkovsky (2007) explain that after the implementation of an after-school program for immigrant parents in Maine, the parents reported and demonstrated a higher level of interaction with their child. For example, parents spent more time reading and talking about books with their children (Schechter et al., 2007). Parents also became aware of and sought out specific learning tasks, and communicated more with the teachers and staff of the school (Schechter et al., 2007). This is similar to the results of another parental involvement program for immigrants in Washington D.C, where one parent said that she learned about the resources offered by the school and how she would not have known about them if she had not joined the program (Sobel & Kugler, 2007). Besides the benefits that the immigrant parents gain from joining these parental involvement programs, it also has positive impacts for immigrant students and English language learners. (Schechter et al., 2007). Results from an implementation of a parental involvement program in three Canadian schools showed that immigrant and ELL students had higher levels of self-confidence when participating in class and interacting with their peers, increased interest in class activities and less uncertainty in asking for help (Schechter et al., 2007). The grades of these students were 10 to 15% higher after their participation in the after-school program for both their parents and themselves. These groups of students also

praised the aspect of parents working with them on their homework assignments, whereas it was undervalued and unappreciated before the implementation of the program (Schechter et al., 2007). This supports my proposal for the positive learning outcomes of Hispanic ELL's that could result from a greater participation of Hispanic parents and by expanding the "back to school" nights with a flexible parental involvement program.

### Overcoming Obstacles

Barriers within the everyday lives of Hispanic immigrants or conflict of attitudes and expectations for getting involved in school's for their child may hinder and limit the parents from participating (Sosa, 1997). Logistical barriers of time, money, safety, child care, and the segmentation of programs may limit the involvement of Hispanic immigrant parents (Sosa, 1997). Attitudinal barriers of uncertainty and dissatisfaction with how they can help their child may also hinder parents from participating (Sosa, 1997).

It may be difficult for recent or new Hispanic immigrants to participate and attend school programs when they may be working long hours because of financial difficulties (Sosa, 1997). They might be working hard and long hours to provide the bare necessities for their family and attending to their child's schooling would prevent them from working leaving them at the poverty level (Sosa, 1997). It may also be difficult for them to commute from their workplace to the school because of the distance or lack of transportation. Besides their work locations they might have other obligations of picking up their other children at different schools which make it difficult for them to commute back and forth (Sosa, 1997). Depending on the time of day, parents may be hesitant on attending events at the school since it is not located in the safest of neighborhoods. Parents might have other obligations of taking care of their other kids when they return from work. It may be a hassle for them to arrange a babysitter to take care of them and for

financial reasons; they may not be open to this idea of spending money on a babysitter (Sosa, 1997).

The logistical barriers can be addressed and reduced if the school offers flexible ways in which the parents can get involved with their child's schooling. If time and safety is a concern for parents, the parents can be invited to observe their child in the classroom so they can gather ways of helping their child (Sosa, 1997). They could also serve as classroom aides, attend field trips with the class, or assist teachers in other ways (Sosa, 1997). The school also can address these issues if they develop an after-school program rather than just the "back to school" night events (Schechter, Ippolito, & Rashkovsky, 2007). This would require funding, classroom space, the use of teachers, parents or community volunteers, and tools for learning such as books with Spanish translations. It would probably be more appealing if the school can offer a "late-afternoon" or "early supper meal" as some Hispanic families do not have the means to feed themselves. Similar to the program offered in three urban schools within Canada, this would involve the Hispanic ELL students and their parents (Schechter, 2007). During the first hour or so parents can work together with their child by reading books out loud or participating in writing activities as directed by the teachers, parents, or community volunteers (Schechter et al., 2007). An example of reading time could be spent by students reading one paragraph of the story in English and then their parents reads the Spanish translation for that paragraph (Schechter et al., 2007).

Also, the transportation and child care issues can be addressed if the school is willing to offer parents transportation and child care services. For example, if the school has the necessary funds they can supply parents and their children with bus tickets or volunteers can drive the school vans to transport the parents and their children. Avance, a nonprofit group that works

with the Hispanic community has a set of volunteers assigned to pick up families from each neighborhood (Sosa, 1997). In a similar way, parent volunteers or school staff could drive the vans and each of them could pick up families within one neighborhood area.

Child care services could also be arranged at schools during the after-school program and during other events. Similar to the child care services offered at an elementary school in Canada, parents can receive free child care services while they attend school events and the after-school program (Sosa, 1997). The child care services would require parents to take turns in volunteering, especially the parents that are provided with means of transportation by the school (Sosa, 1997). This and other means of reducing the logistical barriers would allow for more Hispanic parents to get involved with their child's schooling. This leads to the other barriers of the Hispanic parent's attitudes and expectations that are in conflict with the school's attitudes and expectations of parents.

Attitudinal barriers of uncertainty and dissatisfaction in not knowing how to help their child may also deter Hispanic immigrant parents from participating in the program (Sosa, 1997). Hispanic immigrant parents might not understand their role is or what is expected of parents in US schools because most people outside of the US believe that it is the teacher's, and not theirs, to educate their child (Sobel & Kugler, 2007). Some might even believe that it is disrespectful to teachers if they get involved with their area of expertise (Sobel & Kugler, 2007). The Hispanic parents also might not realize how to create a learning environment for their child by helping them with homework, playing educational board games, reading and writing for pleasure, or simply having conversations with them (Sosa, 1997). They might also be dissatisfied because they feel that the language barrier prevents them from helping their child (Sosa, 1997). Even further, Hispanic parents might feel that they will be judged negatively based on their inability to

help their child with homework if they attend programs related to their child's schooling (Sosa, 1997).

These issues could be minimized if the school addresses the expectations for Hispanic parent's role in their child's schooling, offers English learning tools to parents, and view parents as useful contributors (Sosa, 1997). Similar to the Committee for Latin Parents (COPLA) Program offered in California, Portsmouth could hold meetings based on learning about the school system, and their responsibilities and rights as parents (Sosa, 1997). Portsmouth Middle School could follow the practices of a project called OPTIMUM in California where parents participate in one-day workshops and become facilitators for other parents to become involved in the school system (Sosa, 1997).

Mainly the issue revolves around Hispanic parents who feel useless to their child because of the language barrier (Sosa, 1997). This could be addressed within the after-school program where English is used and tools for learning English such as books are offered to both parents and their children (Sosa, 1997). As mentioned before, notifications could be sent in both Spanish and English to address this issue. Also, bilingual teachers and volunteers that speak Spanish and English could serve as translators during meetings and events (Sosa, 1997). This should be sufficient in offering parents the support and help they need to become involved in their child's schooling.

### **Background**

My interest in making this proposal arose from my observations of the significant population Hispanic students within the school. The language barrier of the Hispanic immigrant students stood out as one of the significant factors among the other minor problems that limited the progress, pace, and Hispanic, English Language Learner's (ELL) understanding of the



activity or subject matter at hand. My own experience of learning English as a second language has also led me to make the proposals discussed earlier as I can recall the strategies and approaches used by my teachers and parents that were effective for me.

I noticed a wide presence of Hispanics in the classes that I worked with and with many of the other after-school classes. I realized how each of those students was struggling in one way or another because they are not highly proficient in the English language. I have seen a few Hispanic students that continuously relied upon their Hispanic peers that are more capable in speaking English than them to translate for them. The Hispanic ELL's are affected in every way from academics to simple routines and tasks of following the teacher's instructions. I can recall from one of my observations a Hispanic ELL student that struggled with the instructions of a recreational activity which was not even academic related and required the aid of her English-speaking Hispanic friend at all times to translate for her. This demonstrates how crucial it is to learn the English language as it is required in almost every situation. The interactions between the Hispanic immigrant students with their English-speaking peers and teachers are severely limited because they are constantly interacting and relying upon their network of Hispanic friends that are not as proficient in the English language. I have seen most of the Hispanic ELL's shy away from opportunities of working in groups projects with non-Hispanic students to learn and improve their English language skills. Aside from their actions, it seems that some of the teachers are letting the Hispanic ELL's get away with it because having someone to translate for them makes the lesson go smoothly and quickly. I believe this issue should be addressed by the school to encourage interactions between Hispanic ELL's and the rest of the other students, even though it may be challenging.

Not only does this affect Hispanic ELL's but the other students and teachers are also impacted by the former student's inability to speak in English. The wide population of Hispanics in each classroom changes the teaching environment to one which the teacher must be open to adjustments and changes to their lesson plans so that they can incorporate the Hispanic ELL's accordingly. I believe there is always room for improvement of strategies and approaches that teachers could use to educate the Hispanic ELL's and non-Hispanics as a whole.

The language barrier of the Hispanic ELL's also impacts the other students because their interactions with the Hispanic ELL's are limited and places them at a disadvantage when they are communicating with one another in Spanish. I can recall from my observations that a white or African American student would sit next to or close to a pair or group of Hispanic students but they would not interact with one another because the Hispanic students would talk in Spanish leaving them out of the conversation. Other observations similar to this one have led me to make the proposals stated above in the introduction so that both of the Hispanic ELL's and other students would be encouraged to communicate with one another despite the language barrier.

Another observation that has prompted me to make the proposals are for example, the Hispanic families I see outside of the school environment in grocery stores, where the parents and their children are consistently speaking to one another in Spanish. I understand that these parents feel a need for their child to retain the language and traditions of their culture, but Kim (1988) and other studies (Shi, 2006 and Gudykunst, 2005) show that this practice of instilling a strong cultural identity in their child makes it harder for them to adapt to mainstream US culture. Instead they encourage immigrant students to become involved in social networks of the US culture besides those of their own so they can gain confidence and competence in the English language (Xingsong, 2006; Gudykunst, 2005; Kim, 1988). This has led me to one of the ideas

for my proposal in fostering support and involvement of parents in their child's schooling so they can interact with them and learn strategies of how they can help them.

From my own experience of learning English as a Second Language, I agree with the studies mentioned above that interacting with the English-speaking members of the US society can improve one's confidence and understanding of the language (Kim, 1988 & Shi, 2006). I can recall being forced to learn the language and I picked it up quickly because there were no Japanese students in my elementary school. Like the Hispanic ELL's, if there were Japanese-speaking students, I probably would have interacted with them more than other students. My parents and teachers also contributed to my success of learning English. My mother made an extra effort to learn English while helping me on my homework assignments. A trip to the library for the purpose of learning and improving our English was part of a regular routine for my mother and I. As part of the language learning process, my teachers would communicate to my parents with a daily report on any signs of progress in learning English. Aside from literature reviews and studies of effective programs for Hispanic ELL's, the proposals explained above include some strategies that have been effective for me as an English language learner.

### **Closing**

I hope that my two proposals implementing aspects of the SIOP model and adding a flexible way for parents to become involved in their child's schooling will be beneficial in helping the Hispanic immigrants to learn the English language within the academic context. I also hope that the tactics for getting parents involved in their child's schooling will be of use. My purpose in making these proposals is not to blame the teachers of their teaching strategies or the parents for not getting involved, but simply to offer established and effective practices that Portsmouth Middle School could adopt for the Hispanic ELL's.

From reading this paper, I hope the Portsmouth Middle School recognizes its need and ability to expand their learning resources and programs for Hispanics since they comprise about half of the school population. Throughout my observations I have noticed that some of the Hispanic students are struggling in their subject-related courses because of their inability to speak and write well in English. It will become even more difficult for them if they are struggling in their high school subjects because of the language barrier. Also their lack of English proficiency would affect their scores on standardized and placement tests which could negatively affect their chances of getting accepted into colleges. Low scores on placement tests could also place them in non-challenging classroom environments with other minority ELL students which would allow for little or no productive interactions to take place between the students. These are all detrimental to the success of Hispanic ELL's or Hispanic immigrants, which is why it is important that Portsmouth Middle School takes immediate action.

The benefits of implementing my two proposals which are practices known to be effective in other schools should be convincing enough to adopt for the sake of the Hispanic ELL's. I do not intend for Portsmouth Middle School to adopt my proposal in its entirety but rather adopt the parts of the proposals they can support with the resources, tools, and funds available to them. All the same, I hope that my proposals are taken into consideration even if it is not for current use but for future reference.

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