

# HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BEST STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: A COMPARISON OF SHELTERED ENGLISH VS. ENGLISH-ONLY INSTRUCTIONAL MODELS

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## Abstract

This study investigated English language learners' perceptions of their experiences in sheltered English classrooms vs. mainstream English only classes in a southeastern high school in the United States. Participants were all Hispanics from six Spanish speaking countries from South America and the Caribbean. They arrived in the US after their parents had already established previous residence in the US for a number of years. Based on student demographic records, most participants were in their early teens and, by self identification, were qualified to enter or continue high school in the US. They seemed to have received little prior instruction in academic English in their native countries; however, they showed they were on grade level for academic skills in reading and writing in their first language. They tended to be marginally fluent in social English upon arrival to the US.

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This study gives voice to students' perceptions of the effectiveness of educational approaches for developing English language proficiency. Quantitative results revealed that the students preferred a sheltered English teaching approach over main-stream classrooms, as the students perceived sheltered instruction (with scaffolding as instructional support) as a means to develop the English language skills needed to succeed in college. Additionally, when interviewed, students stated that the sheltered English program helped ease their transition into the U.S. high school academics. They claimed that the sheltered classes provided a supportive environment and affirmatively recognized the student's native language and cultural heritage.

Special services for limited-English-speaking students were few and limited until the 1970s. In 1968, the United States' Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act to ensure equal educational opportunities for students with limited English proficiency. In 1974, the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision mandated school districts to provide comprehensible instruction to second language learners. However, the Court failed to mandate a specific approach and left the decision of implementing a program to each state and school district. Decisions were made based on demographics and philosophies, and school districts around the nation adopted varying forms of bilingual education programs (transitional, maintenance or dual immersion) or English language development, from ESL (language focused) to sheltered English (language and academic content focused). Where student language reached a critical mass and where bilingual teachers were available, many districts opted for some form of bilingual programs. Where there were a variety of native languages without a clear critical mass, or where bilingual teachers were not available, districts developed ESOL or sheltered English programs.

In transitional bilingual programs, the

focus was to allow students to begin literacy skills in their native language as they learned English as a second language. Supporters of bilingual education generally agree that competence in the second language is facilitated by competence in the first language (Reyes, 2001, Cloud, et al. 2000, Collier, 1995, Cummins & Swain, 1986). In these programs, English literacy would be introduced after ELLs had acquired a threshold level of linguistic competence in their first language. Once students were considered competent in English, literacy and content instruction in the native language would be eliminated for an all English educational program. Students typically spend between 1-3 years in this kind of bilingual program. However, transitional bilingual programs were seen as a subtractive, compensatory education programs. (Genesee et al 2006; Ovando, 2003; Cummins, 2001; Ovando & Collier, 1998 Crawford, 1995) A student typically transitions from the native language classroom instruction to English instruction after three years. An analysis of this practice would suggest that the student would never possess more than a third grade literacy level in the native language (Ariza, 2006).

In contrast, in bilingual maintenance

or bilingual dual immersion programs, the focus was on fully developing and maintaining literacy and content instruction in two languages. It was additive in nature and considered students' primary language as a resource, not as a problem to overcome. Instruction in these programs would utilize both languages and would last up to 5 years or more.

Research assessing the impact of bilingual programs have reported improved educational outcomes for children in bilingual programs (Thomas and Collier 2002; Lindholm-Leary 2001; Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1993; Lapp & Flood, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1998; Willig, 1985). Moreover, meta-analyses of ELLs' reading performance have concluded that bilingual education has positive effects on reading and that bilingual education is an effective model in promoting academic achievement (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005) Other studies (Lindholm,-Leary & Borsato, 2001, 2002) have indicated that there is indeed an impact on attitudes towards school and college based on participation in bilingual immersion programs. There is also indication that literacy in the primary language aids and contributes to L2 acquisition (Cummins, 1989; 2000 Krashen, 1992 Garc a, 1994; Genesee, 1987).

However, since the passage of anti bilingual legislation in California, Massachusetts, and other states in the US, sheltered English has emerged as the dominant instructional approach for English Language Learners (ELLs). Sheltered English programs students are taught in English and teachers generally use simple language that is tailored to allow students to absorb English while learning academic subjects.

(Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006)

Mainstream educators are now faced with the complex responsibility of teaching grade level content and the target language (English) simultaneously. They must deliver grade appropriate academic content to students whose development of English may be at the very beginning stages. In order to accomplish this, teachers are using sheltered instructional approaches. A sheltered English approach is one that employs teaching strategies in the target language to make the academic content comprehensible. Strategies include adaptation of materials and content, using supplementary materials, linking content to student's background knowledge and experiences, modifying teacher speech to learner needs, providing explicit and clear instruction, clues and cues, sufficient wait time, social interaction among native speakers and ELLs, as well as effective pacing, continuous feedback, and ongoing assessment (Gerena, (in press)). One of the strategies recommended by proponents of sheltered instruction is to allow students, through peers, tutors or teaching assistants, to use the native language of the student to explain and to clarify concepts. (Peregoy and Boyle, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2008; Echevarria and Graves, 2007). This differs from bilingual education in that the native language is used only to clarify concepts and is not used as the medium of instruction.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The politics and ideology of appropriate education for second language learners have been extensively docu-

mented in the literature (Arce, 1998; Carlos, 2003; Hornberger, 2003; Jan, 2002; Mora, J. 2000; Rojas & Reagan, 2003), as have been the views of parents and teachers pertaining to English language acquisition (Lee, 1999; Schnaiberg, 1996; Sheffer, 2001). And although students are acknowledged as stakeholders (Jay & Wakelyn, 1998; Ken, 2004) in the educational partnership with parents, educators, and policymakers, ELL high school students' perspectives and preferences for pedagogy related to English language acquisition are not usually solicited. While decisions about curricular offerings related to English language acquisition should be made based on the best available research, second language education researchers have yet to elicit and examine the perspectives of this very important and directly affected group of stakeholders. The current study begins from the perspective that we should not underestimate high school students' own opinions and their ability to discern the effectiveness of different approaches. Indeed, their perceptions may very well be the missing key (or component) that will drive instruction to a more successful degree.

Kinchin and O'Sullivan (2003) and Erickson and Shultz (1992) have noted that educators know very little about students' preferences, thereby designing learning experiences without input from students about their own learning. This bias is evident in the design, content, and implementation of the overall school curriculum. Students often believe that the methods employed by their teachers often do not match their desires, learning styles or cultural preferences (Savignion and Wang, 2003; Park, C.C., 2002 ). It has also been noted that

students perform better when their preferences are taken into account. (Lannes, et al, 2002, Chen, 1996; Walker, McConnell, Holmes, Todis, Walker, & Golden, 1988), as well as English language development courses (Cowell, 2002; Ochoa & Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004). For instance, proponents and opponents of bilingual education have assumed the role of best judges in deciding which approaches are more appropriate for English acquisition, as ELL high school students' views are left untapped or ranked low in priority. Although most of these students have experienced both sheltered English and mainstream English classes, they seem to be perceived as unqualified to identify which methodologies or combination of approaches have helped them gain proficiency in the target language. Tapping students' experiences can be a valuable additional resource in assessing and evaluating the perceived effectiveness of current pedagogy (McCombs, 2003; Weinberger & McCombs, 2003). Their own experiences with English language acquisition through different types of interventions are all the more important since empirical evidence suggests that sheltered English instruction is a more effective approach to teaching academic English than non-supported mainstream (sink or swim "submersion") academic instruction (Collier and Thomas, 1992; Thomas and Collier, 2002)

## **RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

As the powerbrokers continue to debate the relative merits of various pro-

grammatic approaches to English language acquisition, the concerns of one group of stakeholders have largely been ignored. There has been little research into ELL high school students' own perceptions of their language skills development as they evaluate their experiences in sheltered English and in mainstream programs (a notable exception being Mitra, 2006). Investigating students' own perspectives about the effectiveness of sheltered English approaches for English language development, including English skills needed for post-secondary education, validates their contributions and insights into a pedagogical issue that affects their integration and success in the larger society. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of a group of bilingual Latino high school students regarding their experiences and preferences for educational approaches for developing their English language skills.

Specific questions addressed in this study included:

1. To what extent do previously schooled, L1 literate, and marginally fluent ELL high school students prefer a sheltered instructional approach to helping them develop English language skills, and what are the reasons for their preferences?
2. What are the differences between college bound and non-college bound students in their perceptions of the efficacy of the sheltered English program versus the mainstream program?
3. Are there differences between students whose families speak English at home and students whose families do not speak English at home in their perceptions of the efficacy of the sheltered English program versus the mainstream program?

4. Are there differences between students who are still enrolled in ESL programs and students who have exited ESL in their perceptions of the efficacy of the sheltered English instruction versus the mainstream program?

#### *Participants*

ESOL students in one of the largest high schools in Southeastern Florida, U.S., (census at the time of the study was approximately 4,450) were invited to participate in the study. Participants were drawn from two groups: those identified as levels 1-4 (level one signifies non English speaking) who were still receiving varying degrees of sheltered ESOL services and those in level 5 who had exited the ESOL program and were reclassified as fluent English speakers. Parental permission was obtained to administer the survey to all participants.

Of the 616 participants, three-fourths (n = 462, 75.0%) reported that they were students in general education who had exited the ESOL sheltered English program (while the remaining one-quarter (n = 153, 24.8%) were still in ESOL sheltered English classes. The gender distribution was balanced, with females (n = 314, 51.0%) narrowly exceeding the number of males (n = 301, 48.9%). Over 95% of the students were Hispanic (n = 588, 95.5%). A third of the students lived in homes where English was spoken always or often (n = 205, 33.3%), and nearly a quarter lived in homes where English was never spoken (n = 142, 23.1%). Almost two-thirds of the sample were freshmen (n = 189, 30.7%) or sophomores (n = 211, 34.3%), while the remaining one-third were juniors (n = 81, 13.1%) or seniors (n = 123, 20.0%). Most of the students had spent two or fewer years in shel-

tered ESOL (n = 422, 68.5%). Nearly all of the students planned to attend college (n = 532, 86.4%).

### *The ESOL Program*

One state in the UU, Florida, passed a 1990 Consent Decree state law which mandates that a student identified as limited English proficient must be provided appropriate bilingual or sheltered English services. In this state districts are required to administer an assessment to ascertain the English language proficiency of the student. Although this practice is inappropriate, there are no legal recommendations to test the student in their native language. Students' ESOL (English as a Second Language) levels are based on their scores on the English Oral Language Proficiency Scale. In the county where this school is located, the English Oral Language Proficiency Scale or the Comprehensive English Language Learners' Assessment is used to determine English proficiency. At the school where the study was conducted, only the English Oral Language Proficiency Scale was used for ESOL placement.

In some districts, students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) who are assessed at ESOL levels one through four receive instruction in bilingual settings for physical education, music, art, and science (English/Spanish) and the remaining subjects are given in the native language. In other districts, students receive all academic content instruction through a sheltered English approach in a mainstream English language classroom. In all cases, once a student reaches ESOL level five, he or she effectively exits the ESOL (or bilingual instruction) and receives instruction in English-only mainstream classroom environment along-

side students who are native speakers of English. In sheltered English classes where students receive their academic instruction in English many times there is support personnel, such as peer tutors, teaching assistants, or even a bilingual teacher who may use the primary language as a tool for comprehensible input or may permit students to use the L1 to clarify key concepts in the primary language (Vogt, Echeverria, 2008; Echeverria, Vogt and Short, 2004).

### *Instrument Development*

The Student Perceptions of Language Skills Development (SPLSD) instrument was designed by the primary researcher to document ELL high school students' perceptions of which program they consider more successful for developing English language skills. The purpose of the survey instrument was to provide a means to measure students' perceptions of sheltered English instruction approaches in terms of which method they believe prepared or would prepare them better in acquiring English proficiency, including skills needed for a successful transition to post-secondary education (e.g., note taking, writing, using library resources). The instrument was developed to inquire about perceptions of language development across the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as perceptions of the efficacy of two models of instruction, sheltered vs. mainstream English only programs, in terms of both linguistic and content acquisition.

The initial pool of items was generated based on interviews with ELL high school students (n = 21) and the published literature on language skills development (Ochoa, Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004; McCombs, 2003;

Sheffer; 2001, Hadaway, Vardell & Young, 2001; Geva & Wang 2001; Thomas & Collier, 1998; Jay & Wakelyn, 1998; Swanson & Berninger, 1996; Schnaiberg, 1996; Collier, 1995; Chamot, Dale, O'Malley, & Spanos, 1993; Lapp & Flood, 1992; Zimmerman, 1990; Cumming, 1989; Rice, 1989; San Miguel, 1984).

Categories derived from interviews with students who had exited the sheltered English program and those who were still in sheltered English classes helped in the formulation of some of the items. Additionally, nine items were added to the main questionnaire to collect demographic information on the participants, including gender, ethnicity, age, year in high school, years spent in sheltered English classes, ESOL level (Levels 1-5), projected post secondary plans, and general usage of English in the home and the neighborhood.

The self-report survey instrument consists of 25 items or skills for which students select the type of class that would be more adequate for its development. The rating selection, based on a 4-point, forced-choice Likert scale, includes 1- English-Only Much Better, 2- English-Only Somewhat Better, 3- sheltered English Somewhat Better, and 4- sheltered English Much Better. The items involve such questions as "Which class would have helped you more with writing essay questions in college?" and "Which class would have helped you do less translating between English and your home language when doing classwork?" Eighteen of these questions represent English proficiency (speaking 6 items, listening 5 items, reading 4 items, writing 3 items), 5 questions describe college preparation, and 2 questions deal with translation from English to the home language.

### *Pilot Study*

A pilot study was conducted to identify needed revisions and to explore the validity of the scale. A focus group including ELL high school students (n=17) evaluated the clarity of the questions, the response format, and the overall appearance of the survey layout. Students indicated that, overall, the questions and procedures to complete the survey instrument were not ambiguous, except for the need to streamline one item in the background section. They indicated their approval of the overall appearance of the instrument with comments indicating that the design of the response keys makes it easy to select a choice. To complete this process, students were prompted to define a few vocabulary words which helped the rewording of one item in the main questionnaire. After implementing the revisions suggested by the students, a panel of Bilingual and English teachers (n=10) reviewed the survey instrument for evidence of content validity. The panel reported that no revisions were necessary and that the sample of items was adequate and appropriate to measure perceptions of language skills development.

To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, its final version was field-tested with an additional group of 41 ELL high school students in ESOL levels 3 to 5. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.87, indicating a high reliability. Thus, this final version was administered to the full sample of ELL high school students.

### *Procedures*

Prior to administering the survey, a letter describing the study and a consent form requesting that permission be granted for their children to participate was sent to 1,800 parents of ELL students. Consistent with the letter sent to the parents, teachers

explained the purpose of the study to the students, assured them that their participation was voluntary, emphasized that the instrument was designed to maintain students' anonymity, and gave instructions for completion. Six hundred thirty-eight students with parental approval (35% of those who received the letter and consent form) were administered the questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Subsequently, nineteen students representing ESOL levels 3 to 5, randomly chosen among those who responded to the questionnaire, were invited to elaborate further on their experiences as ELL high school students in open-ended interviews.

After dropping twenty-two surveys from all the responses (n = 638) because the students did not respond to three or more items from the instrument (if students omitted one or two items the mean of all their responses was substituted for the missing values), the final sample included 616 participants. The Cronbach's alpha for this sample was 0.96, indicating a very high reliability. A principal components factor analysis showed that one factor accounted for 72% of the variance in all 25 items. This result supports the validity of the instrument as measuring a single underlying construct—the extent to which ELL high school students perceive the sheltered English approach as more suitable in helping them develop English language skills.

## RESULTS

### *Survey Instrument*

Each student was categorized based on his/her most frequent response. Usually the mean is used to characterize the typical response. However when responses are very skewed, the mean is heavily influenced by the extreme values and is no longer a good choice to represent the typical response. For this reason the mode was used for this study rather than the mean to represent each student's typical response. Table 1 shows that more than two-thirds of the students typically saw the English only mainstream classes as more effective while less than one-fifth saw the sheltered English program (i.e., content taught through English with some home language instruction to enhance comprehensibility) as more effective for developing English language abilities across the four skills.

*College bound versus non-college bound students.* The instrument asked in the background information section students' plans for further education:

**Plans after high school**      College  
    Vocational School              Work

A question that the researchers thought would be useful to consider involved students' perceptions, based on future plans (college bound vs. vocational or work force bound), of which high school instruction

**Table 1 Frequency Distribution of Modal Response**

Modal Response	Frequency	Percentage
English Only much better	429	69.6%
English Only somewhat better	75	12.2%
Sheltered Instruction & English somewhat better	44	7.1%
Sheltered Instruction & English much better	68	11.0%



model was more effective in developing English language skills; the sheltered English approach or the mainstream English approach. A two-way contingency table analysis (see Table 2) was conducted to evaluate whether students who plan to attend college are more likely to see sheltered English as a better approach than students who plan to work or to attend a vocational school after high school.

Results indicated that the apparent differences in the predicted direction were not statistically significant in a one-tail test,  $\chi^2(3) = 5.75, p = .063$ . This lack of a statistically significant difference between college-bound and vocation-bound students led the researchers to conclude that all students, whether or not future plans included college, found the sheltered instructional model as best meeting their needs for language development.

*Students whose families speak English at home versus students whose families speak little or do not speak any English:* Students whose families do not speak English at home may have fewer opportunities to develop their English language skills outside of school as it would indicate that the families are less likely to use English as a primary language of communication or language of home intimacy (Ariza, 2006). Since these students may develop English language skills more slowly, it would be expected that they would prefer a sheltered approach, with which they may feel more comfortable and find more comprehensible. A two-way contingency table analysis, as shown in Table 3, was conducted to evaluate whether students who speak less English at home are more likely to see sheltered education as a better approach than those who speak English at home often or always.

**Table 2 Student's Modal Response by Future Plans**

<b>Modal Response</b>	<b>Work or Vocational School</b>	<b>College</b>
English Only much better	45 (59.2%)	378 (71.1%)
English Only somewhat better	10 (13.2%)	64 (12.0%)
Sheltered Instruction & English somewhat better	9 (11.8%)	35 (6.6%)
Sheltered Instruction & English much better	12 (15.8%)	55 (10.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>76 (100%)</b>	<b>532 (100%)</b>

**Table 3 Student's Modal Response by Frequency of English Spoken at Home**

<b>Modal Response</b>	<b>English Spoken Often or Always at Home</b>	<b>English Spoken Some-time or Never at Home</b>
English Only much better	289 (70.7%)	138 (67.3%)
English Only somewhat better	56 (13.7%)	19 (9.3%)
Sheltered Instruction & English somewhat better	24 (5.9%)	20 (9.8%)
Sheltered Instruction & English much better	40 (9.8%)	28 (13.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>409 (100%)</b>	<b>205 (100%)</b>

The results indicated that statistically significant differences existed in the predicted direction, based on a one-tail test, Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 7.14$ ,  $p = .034$ . These data support the hypothesis that students from homes where English is spoken less often are more likely to perceive a sheltered English program as preferable for developing their English language skills; however, it should be noted that even these students, overall, perceived the sheltered English program as better than mainstream by a margin of more than three to one.

*Students who are still enrolled in sheltered English programs versus students who have exited:* Students who are still enrolled in ESOL may idealize the extent to which English only mainstream classes would accelerate the development of their English language skills and students who have exited the program may miss the more affective sheltered English approach. Thus, it was assumed that students who have exited the sheltered ESOL program were more likely to see the sheltered English approach as better serving their needs than the mainstream program. A two-way contingency table analysis, as seen in Table 4, was conducted to evaluate whether students who have exited ESOL evaluate the English mainstream and sheltered English approaches differently from students who are still enrolled in ESOL.

The results showed statistically significant differences in the predicted direction, based on a one-tailed test,  $\chi^2(3) = 14.00$ ,  $p = .003$ . These data support the hypothesis that students who have not exited ESOL prefer the mainstream (is this accurate?) approach compared with students who have exited the program, who prefer the sheltered English approach.

#### *Open-ended Interviews*

In order to explore students' preferences for sheltered English or English mainstream educational approaches in a more nuanced way and to clarify the views empirically secured by the survey instrument, 17 follow-up interviews were conducted. Students generally reported that sheltered English classes were less crowded than regular classrooms, students worked mostly in groups under the teacher's supervision, and that a partial focus was on improving pronunciation.

#### *ESOL in the beginning levels: Learning transferable skills in a nurturing environment.*

Students described their experiences in sheltered English levels one to three as learning opportunities for language skills acquisition. They recounted numerous instances of guided reading and writing techniques, as well as opportunities to enhance self-con-

**Table 4 Student's Modal Response by ESOL Enrollment**

<b>Modal Response</b>	<b>Enrolled in ESOL</b>	<b>Exited from ESOL</b>
English Only much better	123 (78.8%)	306 (66.5%)
English Only somewhat better	20 (12.8%)	55 (12.0%)
Sheltered Instruction & English somewhat better	4 (2.6%)	40 (8.7%)
Sheltered Instruction & English much better	9 (5.8%)	59 (12.8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>156 (100%)</b>	<b>460 (100%)</b>

confidence and personal pride in their culture. However, there were some indications that less emphasis was placed on developing oral academic language. Use of the primary language became part of the sheltered classroom teachers' strategies and, as such, a tool to enhance comprehensibility and concept development. One student noted that:

"We do not speak English among ourselves because we go as a group from one ESOL class to the next. We are used to speaking Spanish among ourselves. It is difficult to be serious about speaking English unless the teacher requires that English be used at specific times and most of the time. In addition to the context of friends speaking to friends in Spanish, if the teachers also spend most of the day speaking Spanish that we can understand the material, we are learning Spanish well instead of English."

According to students, oral English development in the sheltered English class can also go toward the other extreme, where the teacher highly encourages the use of English. There was a consensus among students that teachers' own usage of English and their tolerance for students' use of Spanish in the classroom varied based on the gender and personality of the teacher. Some teachers would take care to balance out their teaching by using both languages. Other teachers would seldom speak a word of Spanish and required the same from students. In short, the language of instruction and relative emphasis on students' oral English development varied from classroom to classroom. Male teachers were reportedly more forceful about speaking English in the classroom, whereas female teachers were

considered to be more nurturing in that they alternated between the two languages as a means of compensating for what they perceived to be the linguistic challenges students faced.

Most students interviewed reported that they acquired their ESOL teachers' accents, which was a disappointment to them because it differed somewhat from what they perceived to be the standard American accent. For example, one student noted:

"It was obvious to me that my teacher's accent was different than the accent I heard on American T.V. I can still hear myself speak like my first teacher. In the English-only class, students sometimes chuckle when I speak. At times, we (ELL students) discuss and hysterically laugh at our problems in developing an American accent."

While students voiced their disappointments about not developing an authentic standard American accent during their first year of ESOL, most students described their experiences during the first year in those classes in positive terms. Students indicated that school would have been more stressful being in a classroom in which they felt out of place due to linguistic differences. One student commented "I felt comfortable and accepted, because I could speak the language I know to learn and participate in class and not look stupid." It appears that being permitted to speak the native language enhanced the affective aspect. Students credited their bilingual teachers for promoting their development of basic oral and written English in a supportive environment, one in which their facility with L1 was used as an effective tool in providing comprehen-

sible input and output.

*ESOL Level 3 and exiting to the mainstream.* While in the sheltered English classes, students remarked that there was more focus on language development through daily reading, writing, class work, and homework in English. However, when students were exited from sheltered English and reassigned to mainstream classes, they noticed that there was less intensive reading, less emphasis on the mechanics and grammar involved in writing, and less daily homework, but consistent speaking interactions in English with students and teachers. Students felt that mainstream teachers seemed to operate on the assumption that all students in the general, English-only classes possess the same levels of English proficiency, and thus did not provide the types of language support bilingual students felt they needed.

There was a feeling among many students that they progressed very slowly in language development beginning with ESOL level three. For example, one senior noted:

“The work in the sheltered English class became easier and easier as if there were a plateau between the third and fourth ESOL level. Teachers’ lessons became less challenging. The class activities were so repetitive and superficial that students were able to complete them in a short period of time.”

Despite this sense that the progression of their English development had slowed, students’ ability to progress through and out of the ESOL sheltered English program was not impeded. Students had mixed feelings about the quality and standard represented

by the ESOL exit exam, the English Oral Language Proficiency Scale which is a commercially prepared test used by every school in the county where this study was conducted.

Some students had had many experiences taking the test. As one student explained,

“We were bound to pass it. The test was too easy, and we had so many experiences with the content of the test. Many of us may not have been ready to experience all English-only classes.” These two statements appear contradictory.

*Sheltered English versus mainstream English classes: Perceptions of the relative merits of each program.* Students traced many of the setbacks they encountered in mainstream classes to their lack of progress in developing academic English in the sheltered English program. Many felt that the transition to mainstream classes required behaviors different from what they were accustomed to in sheltered classes. Some students acclimated well to English only mainstream classes, on the other hand, and welcomed these changes as they discussed how the regular classes in high school were similar to college courses, in terms of diminished support from teachers, as well as the requirement for a high level of independence and initiative from students.

Many students who had just exited the sheltered English program felt a nostalgia for the sheltered English class because they realized that the support they received in the sheltered English program was now missing in their English only mainstream class. A typical comment regarding the transition to mainstream classes was that it was, for the

most part, overwhelming. One student offered this observation:

“Transfer to English-only classes was hard, because the basic English I learned in the sheltered English class did not help me.”

This became obvious as students struggled to meet higher standards of English composition in terms of writing styles and complexity of the topics. The majority of students believed that sheltered English classes had succeeded in helping them acquire conversational English, but not the types of English needed to satisfy the rigors of regular classes, the FCAT (Florida state test for academic competency), and college preparation. They felt that their sheltered English classes were essentially not providing instruction comparable to English only mainstream programs, but were drowned in minutia, repetitions, and as one student commented “. . . not the real thing yet.” It appeared that the students considered the instruction in the sheltered English classes as language focused and not content focused. In that regard, the objectives in the sheltered English classes were more closely aligned to language learning rather than language acquisition (Krashen, 1981).

In reference to the match between behaviors and skills practiced in sheltered classes and those of English only mainstream classes, students expressed their appreciation for teachers who prepared them to handle the pace in regular classes, develop independence, think in English, and rely less on translation. As such, for some students, the sheltered English experience matched that of the mainstream class. Many ac-

knowledged that it was more often their male teachers in the bilingual classes who enforced rules directing students not to speak Spanish, limited translating between the two languages, conducted the class in a manner that required students to be independent and accountable for their own learning, or created a context in which students were to think about moving soon to all English mainstream classes. In addition, male teachers were reportedly more prone to address the benefits of learning English quickly, as they discussed the opportunities for finding jobs, in addition to pursuing a post-high school degree.

The structure and methods of sheltered English classes were perceived by students to be insufficiently rigorous to pave the way for adjusting to all English classes and as preparation for college. One student related,

“I became lazy because I used the teacher as a resource for everything. In English mainstream -class, I am forced to pay attention. I was held back once for reading and another time for writing. It takes longer to learn two languages at the same time.” (Cummins, 1981)

Irrespective of the perceived shortcomings of sheltered English education, students emphasized that they believe the quality of their content learning would have been at its lowest if they had initially been placed in mainstream classes because they could not have made sense of what was being said or required of them.

Overwhelmingly, students endorsed English only mainstream as a better environment to)the listening, reading, writing, and oral skills necessary to do well in college, but only after they had sufficient lan-

guage skills to be able to perform adequately. In addition to their own experiences with both sheltered English classes and mainstream classes, a small group of students compared themselves to family members and friends who were educated at the same time in other states in environment where instruction in the primary language was not available in the schools. This group reported that when they met with these friends during school holidays or summer vacation, they noticed that the accent of the students educated in Midwestern states was closer to a standard American accent than their own, and they were more fluent in the second language. In addition, those who had returned to Florida from another state to pursue a high school diploma continued in the mainstream classes, while their peers who had never left Florida were still attending sheltered English classes, and expecting to exit the ESOL program in the near future.

*Limit sheltered English classes instruction in high school to two years.* Elaborating on previous answers, students concluded that high school sheltered English classes should be capped at two years, especially for secondary students who have the academic content knowledge, ability, and desire to go to college. Students who had arrived in the U.S. at high school age were concerned that they would not have enough time to become proficient in English if they continued beyond two years in a sheltered English program. However, their answers to whether or not they would place their own children in sheltered English programs were generally affirmative. Although they felt that English only mainstream was the better option for developing the level of

academic English needed for college, they generally concurred that the sheltered English program should be the starting point, at least for a few years.

*Influences from home and community.* Students also commented on issues outside of school that competed, and at times, conflicted with their efforts at becoming English proficient. They mentioned the constant reminders by parents and others to hold on to their heritage and language, which creates an underlying tension between the demands of school and the home reality. After several years of trying to master the English language, one student expressed a common theme with these words:

“Our parents usually engaged us using the Spanish language, because this is what we have always spoken at home, while mindful that we ought to learn English well enough to succeed in this country. We were torn about practicing English at home, such as doing homework, which required additional focus on English, at the expense of using the home language.”

Overall, students seemed to identify strongly with their cultural heritage, to the extent that they would describe themselves as the culture from which they come, such as Cuban, or Venezuelan, as opposed to calling themselves Hispanic. Maintaining Spanish language abilities was not, therefore, an end in and of itself. Rather, it was crucial to preserving a sense of identity and passing on their cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, students who used some English in their homes relied on family members to help them with homework. Those without that type of support found it diffi-

cult to complete homework and receive good grades. A large number of those who were exposed to mainstream classes in school reported using the Internet to help them with their homework assignments, because the Internet has features to translate English to Spanish, and Spanish to English. In general, however, most students do not find it necessary to translate between their first and second languages for daily living activities, since they have mastered basic conversational English. However, for the most demanding academic tasks, as one student put it: "I translate sometimes for reassurance."

In summary, students believe that sheltered English education can be helpful, especially when the methods are consistent with developing the types of English needed and the behaviors expected in English only mainstream classes. They further advocate for a rapid transition between sheltered English and English only mainstream programs in secondary schools. Their goals are to acquire competency in academic and social English proficiency while holding firmly to their cultural heritage and native language.

## **DISCUSSION**

One of the aims of this study was to elicit high school ELLs' perspectives and give voice to their concerns about their language learning program and the language in which they are educated, which is an important facet of their overall educational experience, and one that may have lifelong ramifications. It has been argued that understanding more about students' percep-

tions and considering their perspectives should play a role in efforts to improve curriculum and program delivery (Cowell, 2002; Mitra, 2003). Not only can such inquiry make the curriculum and educational program more responsive to students' needs and concerns, offering students a voice in important aspects of their education can improve their sense of urgency with regard to their educational futures. Indeed, there is considerable thought that student voice and participation in L2 learning environments assist in acquisition of the L2 (Echeverria & Graves, 2008; Diaz-Rico, 2008, Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007; Bransford & Brown, 2000; Nieto, 2002)

The students who participated in this study indicated that they preferred the English only mainstream program to the sheltered English curriculum for a more rapid acquisition of academic English language proficiency, but they also considered the sheltered classroom as a way to ease into an academic English only learning environment. The primary reason for this preference seemed to be that they felt the sheltered English program was not as academically rigorous as the mainstream curriculum, and that the academic expectations were much lower in the sheltered English program. Students reported that sheltered instruction was geared more toward survival than toward academic development. In short, this group of students was eager to be taken seriously in accordance with their future educational and vocational aspirations. Thus, in interpreting the quantitative data, it is worth considering that students' apparent acquiescence to English only mainstream may reflect their perceptions, captured in the interviews, that although the shel-

tered English instructional program helped ease their transition into an US. school, it was insufficient to prepare them for the demands of college. While there was no difference between college-bound Hispanic students and work- or vocational-bound students, in terms of their preference for the English only mainstream program, there was a significant difference between students who were still attending sheltered English classes and those who had exited the program. While students still attending the sheltered program indicated that they were not satisfied with their academic content and language proficiency, the exited students maintained a more favorable attitude towards the sheltered program (We recommend this point be further explored in another study as it is difficult to determine if this perception can only be made after the fact, that is, students would not be able to even be in a mainstream class if they had not started to learn English in the sheltered instruction class.) The finding that students still attending sheltered English classes showed a much stronger preference for the English only mainstream program than those who had already exited the program may reflect an idealized notion on the part of those still enrolled in sheltered English education of the extent to which English-only classes would accelerate their development of English language skills. Those who have moved out of the supportive environment of the sheltered English classroom and into the mainstream English only classroom appear to place more value on the sheltered English environment, as do students whose families speak less English.

As a result of the questionnaire and the interviews, students indicated that they want

the affective support of a sheltered environment with more challenging English only curriculum. What these results may suggest is that while both these groups of students hold the goal of achieving English competency as primary, they may consider sheltered English instruction as a necessary pathway toward the fluency needed to survive in the English-only environment.

The findings from the interviews support such an interpretation. Many current and former ESOL students expressed concerns that while they felt nurtured and supported in the sheltered English classrooms, and it decreased the stress of the transition into the school, some of these sheltered English classrooms did not prepare them as well as they might have to acquire academic knowledge registers of English. After level two in the sheltered English program, many students felt they made much slower progress in learning English. Moreover, they felt they were not fully prepared to enter the mainstream English only environment and no formalized support or sheltering was provided once they had made the leap into the mainstream: it was sink-or-swim.

It is important to note that while these students uniformly valued English as a stepping-stone to academic and vocational success, they also expressed the desire to maintain their native language as a means of maintaining their national/ethnic identity, and they felt that the sheltered English education program generally supported such second language acquisition, while also valuing their cultural background. Nevertheless, students expressed that they experienced conflicts in trying to acquire English while maintaining the native language. Those who spoke



little English at home related in the interviews that they struggled with feelings of betrayal to their cultural identity through such everyday acts as doing homework in English.

Noting that research in the area of the effectiveness of sheltered English education has reported mixed results, the use of a multimethod approach was undertaken to survey a large population of students, followed by interviews to provide richness and depth to the quantitative data. Standardized administration of surveys can fail at times to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under study. In addition to the reliability of a scale, providing an avenue for participants to elaborate on their responses to a scale through detailed interviews may keep researchers from potentially misleading interpretations of collected responses (Elliott, 2004). Taken alone, the quantitative data could point to English mainstream as the preferred approach among Hispanic high school ELLs. While the qualitative results add further support to these findings, the latter results clarified that in the context of the sheltered English program they had experienced, students who had already exited the sheltered program believed that the sheltered classes lacked rigor, resulting in their desire to be in English only mainstream classrooms, which they believed provided instruction more aligned with their college aspirations. However, students also reported that once exited from the sheltered program, the realizations of how the sheltered approach was useful and effective became more apparent.

#### *Implications for Practice and Further Research*

This study contributes to the body of research focusing on the impact of sheltered English education programs (Diaz-

Rico, 2008; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Echeverria & Graves, 2007; Crawford, 2000; Gandara, 1999, 2000; Cummins, 1993; Fillmore, 1991; Imhoff, 1990) by adding a new perspective: the students' own perceptions and opinions. Although the authors of this study are aware that the ultimate decisions about curriculum and programming should be made by professionals in the area of sheltered English education and English language learning, these professionals should not underestimate students' ability to reflect on the outcomes of instruction. Their perceptions and preferences should be an additional piece of information taken into consideration in the decision making process.

#### **SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS**

An important theme in the findings of this study was that students felt they made little further progress in their English language development after the second year in the sheltered English program and that because the program lacked academic rigor, they were ill-prepared to make the transition into the mainstream classroom. These findings suggest that research is needed to explore the context of instruction in the sheltered English program and the relationship between the language instruction in the sheltered English curriculum and the academic language requirements of the mainstream curriculum. The question arises as to whether the sheltered English curriculum and pedagogical methods being used are informed by the academic linguistic requirements of learning in the content areas.

Additionally, students suggested that

male teachers seemed to accentuate the need to acquire English more quickly than did female teachers because they positioned the sheltered English classroom as a temporary setting for students, whereas female teachers seemed to take on a nurturing role toward second language learners. Further study is needed to ascertain whether there is a gender difference in the ways that sheltered English teachers approach English language teaching. An important issue to investigate is whether there is a gender difference among teachers in the way they view the purpose of the sheltered English program and their role within it. In addition, it would be worthwhile to explore if gender also has an impact on adjustment and achievement in the mainstream classroom.

#### *Limitations*

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution, given that most of the respondents were previously and appropriately educated, L1 literate high school age Hispanics, from six Spanish speaking countries attending school in Southeast Florida, where the majority of students are ELLs. Thus, this group represented a “majority” group and not a “minority” group. Hispanic students or other ELL groups who live in other states in the U.S. where they constitute a numerical minority might provide substantially different responses. Another limitation is the fact that the study was done in a single high school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The array of programs labeled “sheltered English” and the lack of uniformity in implementation of what is referred to as “sheltered English” within and across school districts means that students’ experiences and perceptions may

be substantially different in other schools.

The apparent preference for English-only classes over sheltered English expressed by the students in this study needs to be understood within the context of the social and institutional opportunities and constraints associated with English use. Students perceive the dominance of English at school, work, and in business in the United States, and the context of schooling reinforces this dominance, as the outcomes of high stakes testing and the ability to earn a high school diploma are both contingent on English proficiency. In addition to daily exposure to the English-dominant school context, students’ conversations with parents and neighbors tend to support the acquisition of the English language as the gateway to the American dream and subsequent success. Moreover, exposure to numerous media outlets continuously reinforces the instrumental benefits of acquiring the dominant language. However, listening to ELL students’ voices on the subject of sheltered English versus English only mainstream education, it becomes clear that the desire to become proficient in English does not necessarily imply that learners reject their native language, nor that they wish to assimilate to the dominant culture. Given how critical programmatic choices related to language of instruction are critical for students’ academic success, their experiences with sheltered English education should not be overlooked in research and planning for English language development. In fact, their input can help guide educators in effective planning for successful sheltered English education programs.

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