Mia Carta moved to Tucson from Central America with her husband and four children five years ago. As a political refugee, Mia and her husband were required by the U.S. government to attend four months of English as second language (ESL) instruction to prepare for employment. Unfortunately, Mia was unable to complete the ESL class because of scheduling conflicts. Mia’s husband, Jose, completed the four month ESL class and found a job at a local fast food restaurant making minimum wage.

Three months later, Jose and Mia realized one income was not enough, so Mia took a job as a maid in a nearby hotel. Unable to speak English, Mia performed her duties by relying on her Spanish-speaking co-workers for instructions. Many months later, Mia inquired from one of her co-workers about English classes for non-native speakers. Her co-worker told her about free ESL classes sponsored by the Tucson Reading Program (TRP) in her neighborhood. Mia was excited about the opportunity to learn English; however, she felt reluctant to engage in class activities because of her limited educational experience from her home country. As required for enrollment, Mia took the “Basic English Skills Test” (BEST) and was assessed in the lower beginning level. In addition, it appeared that her native language literacy skills were also low because of her limited education.

After the initial assessment, Mia attended her first ESL class at Alexander Middle School and was surprised to discover that all of the adult students were Spanish-speakers. The ESL instructor, who did not speak Spanish, presented all the course materials in English. The class environment was warm and friendly, and the instructor asked students to share personal information as a warm-up activity. After this activity, the teacher wrote sentences on the whiteboard, asking each student to read out-loud. When the instructor pointed to Mia indicating her turn to read, she slowly pronounced each letter according to her limited knowledge of the Spanish alphabet. The instructor quickly corrected each error and asked Mia to repeat the correct answer using complete sentences. Mia’s anxiety increased after each attempt to pronounce the words, and she became ashamed because she did not understand the course reading activity content.

At the completion of the semester, Mia took the required “BEST” test and failed after several attempts. Frustrated and discouraged, Mia’s desire to learn Eng-
lish soon faded and her self-esteem dwindled. Convinced that she would never succeed, Mia dropped out of the program.

Introduction

This vignette describes a fictional story and a fictional character, Mia Carta, a Spanish-speaking immigrant living in Tucson. Although fiction, this representation illustrates the struggles of many Spanish-speaking adult immigrants who want to learn English and are unable to. Mia’s story describes her motivation to learn English and struggles of learning English in a monolingual context. Additionally, this vignette explores how low proficient Spanish-speaking adults may need additional linguistic support in their native language in order to acquire a second language. Current literature has limited information about effective teaching methods for this population. There is much theoretical discussion on second language (L2) acquisition; however, L2 research does not sufficiently address the diverse needs of low-proficiency adult Spanish-speaking immigrants.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how monolingual instructional support most commonly used in U.S. ESL education, is insufficient for the needs of diverse ESL learners. To correct this problem the combination of dual language instruction and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) approaches should be incorporated into an effective ESL curriculum.

This paper will include a research study and a theoretical framework of Vygotsky’s ZPD research, dual language, and immersion programs. Also I will describe the setting and participants of the study concluding with a discussion and recommendations for teaching methods and suggestions for future research.

Illustration of the Problem

Becoming proficient in English is critical for Spanish-speaking adult immigrants living in the United States. Having English literacy skills enables adults to find better paying jobs, improve healthcare conditions and participate in civic and social activities. The 2005 U.S. Census Bureau indicates that the United States foreign-born population tripled from the 1970’s to 2005 with an estimate of 35.8 million people speaking languages other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). With over half of the immigrant population Spanish-speaking, many of these adults have low level formal education and limited literacy skills in their native language. These limited English Proficiency (LEP) adults make up twenty-two percent of the country's low-wage workers and forty-four percent of all workers with less than a high school education (Narasaki & Lee, 2007, p. 74).

Consequently, there is an increased demand for adult education programs that prepare immigrants for English acquisition skills. Government funding for these programs has decreased resulting in long waiting lists and overcrowded classrooms. A recent report from the “Adult Literacy Education in Immigrant Communities” states Phoenix the state’s largest English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provider has a waiting list more than one thousand people and up to eighteen months for English classes (Narasaki & Lee, 2007).

Locally, the Tucson provides over thirteen English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) learning center locations and one-on-one tutoring. ELAA, a part of the “ProLiteracy America” organization, supports basic literacy for English native speakers and non-native speakers of English (Narasaki & Lee, 2007).

Presently, adult literacy education programs have limited funding sources. Additionally, the majority of ESL volunteers who teach ESL classes are monolingual and have limited training or no training on how to teach diverse learners (ProLiteracy Worldwide, 2006). Adult educational programs for second language learners will need additional financial support, trained staff on multiple teaching techniques, and socio-cultural approaches to promote adult learning through interactions.

Theoretical Framework

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky’s ZPD approach to language learning through interaction is the key concept in socio-cultural theory. He claims that interaction not only enables language learning, but is the foundation of acquisition (Saville-Troike, M., 2006). According to Vygotsky’s approach to language acquisition, learning begins with the simple act of mental activity that develops into a “higher order” which becomes more complex in cognitive functioning (Saville-Troike, 2006). In other words, an individual’s current mental condition attains a higher mental capacity with assistance. This interpersonal interaction is accomplished when the expert or teacher collaborates with the learner and helps with performance. This mediation is called the ZPD (Saville-Troike, M. 2006). ZPD occurs when the learner is assisted by a more knowledgeable peer or teacher. This collaborative interaction occurs through scaffolding, is a form of guidance the expert gives to the learner to perform a specific task (Saville-Troike, 2006). An example of ZPD through scaffolding described in Luis Moll’s (1992) micro-ethnographic research study titled “The Social Construction of Lessons in Two Languages.” His socio-cultural research describes ZPD in the context of children’s behavior in the classrooms observed. The children in this study attended English and Spanish reading classes in a bilingual program south of San Diego. The study reveals that the children performed differently in the English class compared to the Spanish class (p.361). Moll claims that the children performed appropriate behaviors to complete tasks under the guidance and instruction of the teacher. Therefore, a child carries out this interaction in his or her own mind and performs the activity prescribed by the learning experience he or she had with the teacher (p.341). Moll’s research focused on the teacher’s way of organizing course materials to move students from lower to higher levels in reading (1992, p.343).

The results of Moll’s study identify distinct differences of focus in instruction and teacher-student interaction in English and Spanish development. Their research suggests an interpretative example of ZPD through the teacher influence on instructional input which dictates students’ learning development and performance outcomes (Moll, 1992).

Researchers Gonzales and Arnot-Hopfner acknowledge ZPD interaction theory through outside negative influences that impact language development. Their research suggests another element of ZPD as it relates to outside influences. In this study, the children also...
participate in a bilingual, Spanish/English program; however, they are negatively influenced by media and public discourse. Gonzales and Arnot-Hopffer claim that Arizona’s Proposition 203 made a significant impact on learning language and classroom practice. From their analysis, the children in the study were brought into a volatile and contentious array of viewpoints due to the political climate (p.220). They argue that the children and teachers’ relationships were negatively impacted by public opinions and guidelines that restricted growth and language development (pp. 238-239). The children in this study demonstrated a heightened awareness of language ideologies from the public that impeded upon their language identity as Spanish-speakers and discouraged further development of dual language competence (Gonzales & Arnot-Hopffer, 2003).

Scaffolding within the ZPD is one way to help learners in language development (Saville-Troike, 2006). Teachers that involve learners and create meaningful interaction activities foster language acquisition (Harklau, 1994). However, lack of comprehensive input within ZPD can produce opposite results. Linda Harklau’s research study of ESL versus mainstream classes compares ESL high school students and the instructional methods of two environments, their behaviors and language proficiency necessary to succeed in academic development. Other immersion environments, such as those described in Collier and Thomas’ study in the eastern United States, suggest that second language learners who are taught in an English-only context without the aid of explicit instruction in their native language struggled with acquisition. These two studies illustrate children’s language development in a monolingual context.

According to Swain’s (1998) research of a French immersion program located in Canada, many of the students began learning in a French-only context until the third grade (p.65). Between the third and eighth grades, these students received some instruction in English, their native language. The student participants in this study were eighth graders who took several academic subjects in French (Swain, 1998). The overall second language learning was communicative and experiential in a content-based format. Over two decades of French immersion research suggest that the students were able to comprehend, listen and read at proficient levels; however, they did so in substandard composition of words and grammar (1998, pp.79-80).

The results of the study identify “gaps” in the students’ interlanguage production (Swain, 1998). Interlanguage in this context describes the output of what the students want to say and their actual language ability (Swain, 1998). Swain observed that 79% of the student’s output was enhanced with collaboration and peer feedback. The students tested their linguistic skills, focusing on vocabulary, morphology, syntactic structures and co-constructed knowledge(Swain, 1998). He suggests that the students’ collaborative work promoted output and improved aspects of the target language proficiency (Swain, 1998). However, collaboration in and of itself is not a sufficient method because students who gave the incorrect responses also collaborated for answers. These results suggest that accurate pedagogical contexts and correct modeling may enhance and promote learning the target language (Swain, 1998).

In contrast to Canada’s immersion program with some native language support, Collier and Thomas’ research illustrates second language learners of English in a monolingual context (p.27). The majority of these participants were more diverse than the Canadian students representing seventy-five different first language backgrounds. Categorized as “advantaged” immigrants because of their social status in their home countries, these students were classified as at or above grade level in native language, yet they needed ESL classes that were at beginning levels (p.28). These students had a maximum of three years of ESL support and spent the remaining instruction in mainstream classrooms. Collier and Thomas’ research results claim that non-native speakers (NNS) graduates who have been in the U. S. four to seven years performed noticeably lower than NNS arrival at eight to ten years of age. The lower ranked students did not reach the 50th percentile during the course of the research study and the researchers projected that these students would take seven to ten years to reach standardized levels (p.28). Additionally, Collier and Thomas note that NNS students

Immersion Instruction

Integrated approaches to second language acquisition represent various interpretations of what methods are most effective for second language proficiency. Bilingual or dual language programs may consist of combined language instruction: one in the native language and the other in the target language (McGroarty, 2001). More familiar immersion programs modeled in Canada expose the learners to the target language sequentially in their academic development. Other immersion environments, such as those described in Collier and Thomas’ study in the eastern United States, suggest that second language learners who are taught in an English-only context without the aid of explicit instruction in their native language struggled with acquisition. These two studies illustrate children’s language development in a monolingual context.

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who received a minimum of two years of first language instruction in their own countries measurably excelled over ELL students who received little to no first language education (p.54). Collier and Thomas argue that ESL students who receive three to four years of formal education in their first language most often reach the 50th percentile on tests (1989, pp. 28-34).

**Dual language Instruction**

Adult educational programs for ESL that support bi-literacy development create learner-centered environments (Narasaki & Lee, 2007). A large scale research study conducted by Larry Condelli and Heide Spruck Wrigley, titled *What Works*, compiled data from thirty-eight ESL classes in seven states offering effective teaching strategies that help ESL adults with English literacy and verbal skills. The study proposes that instructional methods that implicate use of a native language in the context of ESL classrooms reduces learner confusion and creates opportunities for critical thinking skills (Narasaki & Lee, 2007).

Collier and Thomas imply from their study and other research suggesting that successful long term academic performance of ESL children occur in school programs that focus on the continuation of “cognitive-academic” development in both first and second languages (p.35). They argue that the bilingual maintenance and two-way bilingual immersion programs should include strong “cognitive-academic” learning approaches which develop NNS students with no loss of time in comprehension in course content at secondary levels (p.35). These researchers claim that ESL students retain or excel in grade level standardized tests over ESL students taught in monolingual learning environments (1989, p.35).

Krashen (1984) as cited by Snow (2001), states that “second language acquisition occurs when the learner receives comprehensible input, not when the learner is memorizing vocabulary or completing grammar exercises; the focus is on the subject matter and not on the form or on what is being said rather than how” (Snow, 2001). Snow’s theoretic framework for dual language instruction comes from the context of content-based instruction as the medium to language acquisition (Snow, 2001). She notes that support of instruction develops literacy in the first language while enhancing understanding of the theories that effectively motivate second language learning through L1 literacy development programs (1994). This study reveals an additional variable influencing students. In the rest of the paper, I am going to examine two classes that use these theories in the design and implementation of instruction to see if this kind of instruction is theoretically more appropriate for adult ESL learners. The discussion will highlight how monolingual instruction most commonly used in U.S. ESL education, is insufficient for the needs of diverse ESL learners. To correct this problem the combination of dual language, immersion and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) approaches should be incorporated into an effective ESL curriculum.

**Research Procedures**

The Setting:

This pilot study took place in two adult ESL classrooms located in southern Arizona. The classrooms were taught by volunteer English Language Adult Acquisition (ELAA) tutors certified by the state of Arizona through Tucson’s Reading Program (TRP) (a pseudonym). The program offers assistance with English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA, formerly ESOL), Basic Literacy Skills (ABE), Pre-GED (preparation for the high school equivalency test), and citizenship. The ELAA tutors receive eighteen hours of training which follows the guidelines of the Arizona Adult Education ESOL Standards. TRP is an affiliate of ProLiteracy America, the largest organization of adult literacy programs globally, and receives funding from the state (ProLit-

eracy Worldwide, 2006). Their base mission is to support adult learners and aid them with reading and writing skills that will better their lives both economically and socially.

Two classrooms were involved in the study: one English-only located at the Clark School (a pseudonym) site and Richards School (a pseudonym) dual language, English-Spanish instruction. Clark school conducts two 2-hour weekly morning classes, and Richards offers classes in the evening for the same duration.

**Participants of the Study**

Most volunteers at both schools are native English speakers and vary in their social economic backgrounds. The students that attend ESL classes are adult immigrants from several countries; however, the majority are Spanish speakers from Latin America. The participants of the study at Clark school are all female: both the instructors and the students. At Richards, the instructors are two females, with the majority of the students female and only two males. At both locations, the number of students varied from ten to fourteen students. These students were evaluated into beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency.

The adult learners in both classrooms were taught using the communicative approach to second language teaching. The instructors used thematic context to guide the learning and discussions in the class. Similar emphasis on language instruction was given in each class with the distinction of one class taught in English only and the other in English-Spanish.

The teachers were European American native English speakers, and the students were of predominately Mexican and other Latino heritage.
Data collection and analysis

The central focus of this research was to compare and contrast the interactions among the students, the teachers and the instructional methods used. I observed each classroom, taking field notes for twelve hours, and spent four additional hours interviewing students and teachers. Prior to the audio-recorded interviews, I provided written questionnaires in Spanish and English for the participants. After prioritzing these themes, I identified common trends and threads that directed the focus of the research.

In order to ensure accuracy of the interviews in Spanish, I requested assistance from a colleague who is a native Spanish-speaker to assist in translation. Findings were then organized into key topics for discussion section of this paper.

Discussion/Conclusion and Recommendations

Common Themes

The teacher and students interviews from both Clark and Richards schools had many common themes. Students and teachers valued promoting positive relationships and community in the classroom. Additionally, both groups stressed the importance of English proficiency in their native language. One Clark instructor described an experience of a student not knowing how to write the Spanish translation of the definition of “near” and the student asked for help. The instructor utilized her bilingual skills during the discussion and translated the words in their notebooks to help them understand. Many of the students engaged in classroom discussions used both their English and Spanish skills. Those who appeared more fluent in English assisted less proficient students with oral pronunciation and written activities.

Contrastive Trends

Clark School teachers taught all women students who had children attending public school while they learned English. The classroom table and chairs were set up in a U-shape format with a table for instructors at the front of the room. Students generally arrived on time and had notebooks and pencils ready at the beginning of class. The students varied in English proficiency from lower to higher levels. Lessons were taught in English and the students talked among themselves in Spanish. When asked to respond to oral activities, the most fluent English speakers answered the questions while others listened and wrote down the words in their notebooks.

Richards School teachers taught male and female students. The tables were scattered down the word in their notebooks. Students who had children attending class sat at one table in the back of the classroom. In addition, the teacher was often interrupted by several students arriving late. The instructor utilized her bilingual skills during the entire class time by first giving instructions in English and then translating key words into Spanish. Many of the students engaged in classroom discussions used both their English and Spanish skills. Those who appeared more fluent in English assisted less proficient students with oral pronunciation and written activities.

Recommendations

This research examined two ESL classrooms taught by ELAA volunteer instructors. I collected a total of sixteen hours of data using field notes and audio-taped interviews from the students and their instructors. However, what limits this study is lack of additional data from all students which would have provided more in-depth analysis to account for other variables. The study was limited to a total of five female interviewees that volunteered to participate. Additionally, the data was retrieved from more highly proficient English speakers, yet over half of the student population was of low English proficiency.

In order to adequately represent the voices of this population, more interviews over a longer period of time would have increased the validity of the study. A more descriptive ethnographical report over a longer period of time could have adequately represented significant behaviors and motivations necessary for effective instruction of ESL Spanish-speaking adult immigrants.

Limitations

This qualitative micro-ethnographical study examines two ESL classrooms taught by ELAA volunteer instructors. I collected a total of sixteen hours of data using field notes and audio-taped interviews from the students and their instructors. However, what limits this study is lack of additional data from all students which would have provided more in-depth analysis to account for other variables. The study was limited to a total of five female interviewees that volunteered to participate. Additionally, the data was retrieved from more highly proficient English speakers, yet over half of the student population was of low English proficiency.

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Recommendations

This research examined two ESL classrooms with different instructional approaches to English teaching. By comparing and contrasting the two ESL learning environments through observations and interviews, patterns and common trends emerged. In general, I observed instructors and students collaborated to develop a thematic focus in the English lessons such as how to read over-the-counter medicines or how to compare apartment rental

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language input is vital to support proficiency in well organized and attentive sequencing of language acquisition. Therefore, she claims that second language and is not enough for language development for Spanish-speaking adult learners. The combination of these three theoretical approaches in the ESL classroom will promote more meaningful context for Spanish-speaking adult immigrants to learn and develop English proficiency.

More research is needed to fully respond to the needs of adult Spanish-speaking immigrants in the ESL classroom, research that identifies strengths and weaknesses of current programs such as those mentioned in this study, may foster improvements in teaching strategies that better respond to diverse learners acquiring a second language.

Endnotes
1 Mia is a fictional character and so her story too.

References:
