



Sheltered Instruction: Best Practices for ELLs in the Mainstream

by Holly Hansen-Thomas

To provide all learners with the same high-quality, academically challenging content, educators must reach both native English speakers and those learning English as a second language.

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Many schools and school districts are implementing sheltered instruction to help serve the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) in mainstream content-area classes. Sheltered instruction is a research-based instructional framework that provides clear and accessible content and academic language to ELLs in pre-K–12 grade-level classes. Programs such as Sheltered Instruction Observa-

tion Protocol (SIOP) assess and measure implementation of sheltered instruction and are used in staff development with both English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and content-area, mainstream teachers to promote use of sheltered techniques in grade-level classes.

Sheltered instruction combines both tried-and-true instructional techniques that characterize what experienced educators know as good teaching practices and instruction specially designed to meet the linguistic and educational needs of immigrant and nonimmigrant second-language learners in U.S. schools. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of sheltered instruction, show how it can be implemented in mainstream classes, and encourage its implementation in pre-K–12 grade-level classrooms.

“Sheltered instruction is designed to provide second language learners with the same high-quality, academically challenging content that native English speakers receive.”

Research-Based

Research demonstrates that teachers trained in sheltered instruction through SIOP provide effective and successful instruction for ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2008). Moreover, this research has shown that students in classes with SIOP-trained sheltered instruction teachers outperformed those whose teachers were not similarly trained (Echevarria et al. 2008). Thus, the effectiveness of sheltered instruction for ELLs has been successfully demonstrated through research.

Good Teaching and Language-Based Features

Also called Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), sheltered instruction uses a commu-

nicative approach—emphasizing communication and functions over grammar and form—to teach language and content. The approach highlights use of language functions such as negotiating, explaining, describing, and defining when discussing content concepts.

Features of sheltered instruction include:

- use of cooperative learning activities with appropriately designed heterogeneous grouping of students;
- a focus on academic language as well as key content vocabulary;
- judicious use of ELLs’ first language as a tool to provide comprehensibility;
- use of hands-on activities using authentic materials, demonstrations, and modeling; and
- explicit teaching and implementation of learning strategies.

In addition, incorporating students’ background knowledge into classroom lessons is also an emphasis. Using students’ background knowledge helps to provide appropriately designed instruction that is tailored to the ELLs’ individual needs. Higher-order language, especially within questioning (Echevarria et al. 2008), and use of critical thinking are also important components of sheltered instruction.

Who Uses Sheltered Instruction and Where?

Sheltered instruction is used in mainstream classrooms that include a combination of ELLs and native English speakers or in classrooms with ELLs only. Sheltered classes can be team-taught by an ESL teacher and a content-area teacher or taught by a content-area specialist trained in sheltered instruction. Sheltered instruction is designed to provide second language learners with the same high-quality, academically challenging content that native English speakers receive through a combination of good teaching techniques and an explicit focus on academic language development. Teachers trained in sheltered instruction implement sheltered techniques in all content areas including math, science, social studies, and English.

Similarities to Other Approaches

A combination of factors recently has led to sheltered instruction taking center stage as a support for ESL students. These factors include increasing numbers of ELLs in U.S. public schools; educators concerned for the welfare of ELLs; and the many federal, state, and district-level mandates that dictate the need to better serve the needs of the many Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students in mainstream classes. Despite its recent popular-

ity, sheltered instruction has been around for a number of years. Since its inception, however, the approach has changed, particularly in the way it is implemented. Today, the approach is used in mainstream classes and is no longer restricted to homogeneous settings with only ELLs.

A similar instructional model for ELLs in content-area classes that has been in use with ELLs for some time is the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), as described by Chamot and O'Malley (1994). CALLA played an important role in laying the groundwork for today's implementation of sheltered instruction. Features of the CALLA model inform sheltered instruction in general and are used as techniques in sheltered classes. Both approaches include a focus on academic content and language, use of learning strategies, and hands-on activities. Facets of other instructional approaches and activities, such as Differentiated Instruction and Cooperative Learning, also form a part of sheltered instruction as it is currently being used.

'Just **Good Teaching**'

Content teachers in elementary and secondary classrooms use a variety of techniques to facilitate students' learning. In fact, most good teachers often incorporate aspects of sheltered instruction in their teaching—whether or not they are familiar with it. Because many integral features of sheltered instruction mirror general best teaching practices, good teachers who use a variety of techniques to make content clear are already on their way to implementing sheltered instruction in their classes.

Classes such as science and math often are relatively more comprehensible for ELLs. Coincidentally, both of these disciplines use teaching practices that form part of the repertoire of sheltered instruction. By virtue of its motivating, interactive, hands-on nature, science is a course in which ELLs are often successful. In many science classes, students work in pairs or small groups on interesting, motivating tasks that require students to engage in learning by doing—dissecting frogs, growing plants, and sorting potato chips—to understand anatomy, biology, and classification systems. Implementation of interesting content, along with supports to scaffold student learning such as realia (for example, math manipulatives), investigations, and demonstrations can help provide the assistance ELLs need to be successful (Chamot and O'Malley 1994).

In addition, academic reforms in mathematics education over the past decade have transformed math class from a traditional, individualistic, and product-oriented setting to one that values cooperation, discovery, and process learning. Reform-oriented math classes take into account needs of diverse learners by emphasizing academic

language, group interaction, and culturally relevant instruction (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics 2000). As with science, many of the characteristics of reform mathematics mirror sheltered instructional techniques. In fact, a number of academic disciplines already incorporate aspects of sheltered instruction in their teaching.

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To be sure, many features of sheltered instruction can be considered “just good teaching” (Echevarria and Graves 2007). When studying sheltered instruction, preservice and in-service mainstream, content-area teachers often ask, “How is this different from what I learned in my special education (for nonspecialists) course?” or “How is this specific to the needs of ELLs?” An appropriate response to these reasonable queries is that a combination of good teaching practices is crucial in sheltered instruction, including an explicit focus on language that will both help ELLs understand and use critical academic language.

Moreover, teachers implementing the features of sheltered instruction with ELLs need to know that is not acceptable to pick and choose the modifications they want to use in their classrooms (Echevarria et al. 2008). To increase the likelihood that the academic content and language will be comprehensible to the ELLs, teachers must incorporate all the features of sheltered instruction.

Second Language Learners' Needs

Though it is true that many features of sheltered instruction are just good teaching practices, some features are specific to second language learning and the needs of CLD students. For example, sheltered instruction outlines the need to allow ELLs to use their first language (L1) in

the classroom when appropriate, as well as the use of L1 texts and resources that will serve to clarify academic concepts in the second language (L2). This means that when teaching *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a middle school English Language Arts teacher could permit ELLs to read a copy of the book in the L1 as well as in English. In addition, that teacher could provide opportunities for lower proficiency ELLs to discuss salient points of the book in the L1 with others who share the same L1.

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Teachers of ELLs also must attend to their own language. ELLs are challenged by rate of speech; use of colloquialisms; and both high-level academic vocabulary and more common vocabulary that has multiple or polysemous meanings, such as *table* or *plane* in math. Similarly, teachers must be aware that words that sound the same but are spelled differently, or homophones, such as *some* and *sum* can pose problems for ELLs’ comprehension. Educators of ELLs can alleviate potential comprehension problems by slowing down their speech, writing critical vocabulary on the board, avoiding slang, and providing ELLs time to use the L1 language and resources, when appropriate.

To illustrate how sheltered instruction benefits second language learners, preservice and in-service teachers should put themselves in the shoes of the ELLs in their classrooms and identify the instructional techniques that would facilitate their comprehension of content presented in not only another language, but also from a different cultural perspective. Consider these examples: You are studying the five major continents at a Mandarin Chinese school in Shanghai; you are discussing the conflict over the Malvinas in Spanish, in school in Argentina; or you are practicing long-division prob-

lems in math in Peru. Many teachers will concede that supports in the form of visual aids, explicit teaching of necessary background information, learning strategies, and linguistic cues all would contribute to comprehension and, ultimately, ownership of the lesson’s concepts.

Note: All these sample content concepts can pose potential problems for second language learners because of discrepancies in background knowledge, culture, and linguistic issues. For example, U.S. students are taught that there are seven continents; other countries consider there to be five (and in some places, six). In addition, differences in beliefs regarding historical accuracy abound from one country or culture to another—as in the case of the Malvinas (also known as the Falkland Islands). Other potential problems can result from common learning styles in different countries. For example, a student from Peru learns to do long division without showing his or her work, as is necessary in most math classes in the United States.

The issue of prior or background knowledge is an important one when working with all students, but especially ELLs because they will likely come to school with very different experiences than native English speakers. To be sure, English speaking American students from various cultural, economic, and geographic backgrounds have some different background knowledge, but adding language to the mix further complicates the issue. Though 76 percent of ELLs in American elementary schools are U.S. born (Capps et al. 2005), students coming to school for the first time will have a limited understanding of American public schooling. Further, their experience and knowledge base will be rooted primarily in what is promoted and discussed in the home. When preparing instruction for ELLs in mainstream classes, therefore, teachers must consider language learners’ home experiences as well as educational background, first and second language and literacy proficiency, and cultural and religious norms. In so doing, teachers can identify ELLs’ particular needs and build on home experiences to provide the scaffolding students require for successful comprehension of new content.

Staff Development Is Key

Educators need to be aware of the many features of sheltered instruction to implement it appropriately in their classes. To do this, though, staff development must be conducted on a school-wide basis. Fortunately, many quality training materials are available that describe and illustrate how sheltered instruction is implemented in mainstream classes (see “For Further Reading”). Certainly, teachers must “buy in” to sheltered instruction if they are to implement it appropriately. Because many teachers are already familiar with some of the tenets of sheltered instruction, they may embrace it more readily once they understand how easy it

can be to incorporate on a wide scale. Advocacy in staff development is key. With the help of professional development materials, individuals including administrators, ESL directors, counselors, and teachers can be advocates for sheltered instruction by carrying out the following steps:

1. Demonstrate ways that teachers and colleagues are already using many of sheltered instruction techniques such as cooperative learning, instruction in strategy use, use of manipulatives, and hands-on activities. When educators realize they already implement many

of the techniques, they can be easily encouraged to use additional specific sheltered techniques.

2. Provide explicit instruction to teachers and colleagues about other features of sheltered instruction that they may not know, such as the importance of monitoring teacher language with ELLs by slowing down speech or allowing beginning ELLs to talk to one another in their home language.
3. Encourage school-wide implementation of sheltered instruction. Sheltered instruction will be most effective when everyone recognizes its benefit for ELLs.

How to Be a Sheltered Instruction Advocate

- Identify sheltered instruction techniques that teachers and colleagues already use.
- Instruct teachers and colleagues about language-based techniques they may not already know.
- Encourage school-wide implementation of sheltered instruction.

Sheltered instruction promotes:

- building of background knowledge and connections to students' lives and prior knowledge to increase comprehension;
- incorporation of interesting, motivating content;
- teaching so that content and language is clear and understandable (also called comprehensible input);
- heterogeneous cooperative grouping and interaction among students to provide opportunities in the language they are learning; and
- an outlet for practice of newly learned knowledge, in oral and literate formats.

Specific instructional techniques:

- inclusion of content and language objectives for stu-

dents to monitor their learning and to follow their comprehension of the lesson;

- use of supplementary materials and interactive activities such as visual aids, realia, literature, modeling, demonstrations, manipulatives, and hands-on activities;
- use of graphic organizers to demonstrate relationships between and among content concepts;
- explicit focus on critical vocabulary from the primary content material through use of word walls and student and teacher selected relevant vocabulary;
- focus on multicultural content through inclusion of literature that recognizes students' backgrounds and diverse perspectives;
- judicious use of L1 (native/first language) support;
- clear and appropriate teacher language to ensure that speech is appropriate for ELLs in terms of rate, clarity, avoidance of idiomatic language or slang, especially for beginning language learners;
- higher-order questioning that incorporates critical thinking questions in lessons for students to respond to and interact with; and
- explicit teaching of learning strategies.

Closing Thoughts

Sheltered instruction can be effective for teaching CLD students. Combining good, tried-and-true teaching techniques with specific instructional practices tailored to the second language learner, sheltered instruction is a great way to meet the needs of ELLs in mainstream classes. ■

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