

How SLA Theory Changed My Practice: Content Area Teachers of ELLs Talk¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the different ways a graduate level Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory course influenced the perspective and practice of U.S. mainstream content area teachers with primarily Spanish-speaking English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. Relying on teacher surveys to illustrate how teachers gained knowledge and applied this newly-garnered knowledge to both their own practice, and the sharing of knowledge with colleagues on their campuses, the study revealed that a majority of the teachers feel that it is challenging to apply SLA theory to content classrooms, but that SLA theory facilitates integration of content and language instruction to improve learning for ELLs.

Resumen

Este estudio explora las diferentes formas en que un curso de posgrado en teoría sobre la adquisición de un segundo idioma influyó la perspectiva y práctica de maestros de educación secundaria en los Estados Unidos, que tienen a su cargo estudiantes hispanoparlantes que están aprendiendo inglés como segundo idioma. La investigación se basó en una encuesta que buscó ilustrar la forma en que los maestros adquirieron nuevo conocimiento y lo aplicaron en su propia práctica, y cómo compartieron dicho conocimiento con sus colegas. Se encontró que la mayoría de los maestros consideran que es un reto aplicar la teoría sobre la adquisición de un segundo idioma, pero que hacerlo facilita la integración de la enseñanza del contenido y del idioma y, con ello, el aprendizaje de sus estudiantes.

Introduction

Traditional university-based teacher education programs consist of a relatively balanced mix of theory courses and methods courses (Green & Ballard, 2010-2011; Qu & Becker, 2003). Thus, the same should hold true for well-designed professional development (PD) programs for in-service teachers. However, there can be a disconnect between theory and its application in the classroom. Consequently, this disconnect can be troublesome to the practicing teachers whose greatest concerns have to do with 'Monday morning' and how they will convey whatever particular objective needs to be covered. Often, PD programs serve teachers by providing succinct (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009) information on a topic, highlighting new and innovative (or, in some cases, recycled or repackaged) activities and strategies just for that 'Monday morning'. Teachers want professional job-embedded, collaborative professional development that helps them meet different learning needs, and strategies to differentiate instruction for English language learners (ELLs), special education students, and other groups (Hunzicker, 2011; Reborá, 2008).

The PD project we report on was a long-term program designed to provide in-service teachers with the background, foundations, and methodological strategies and skills to enhance their work with ELLs. As a collaboration between university and school district, this longitudinal project served teachers by first having them take graduate coursework relevant to the education

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of language minority children in secondary schools (including a course on Second Language Acquisition) and then requiring them to train their teacher peers.

Background

Understanding that mainstream teachers of ELLs must hold specific content knowledge and skills in ESL pedagogy, our PD program was rooted in the development of critical knowledge and included an opportunity to apply this knowledge. The PD project in which the teachers participated was a collaborative effort between one of the largest urban districts in Texas, with a population of over 25% ELLs, and a medium-sized public university in Texas. The PD project, funded by the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) National Professional Development grant, served in-service teachers through two primary components: (1) a series of three semester-long ESL-related graduate classes (Multicultural Education, Second Language Acquisition and ESL Methods) and (2) support in the development and presentation of turnaround training sessions to their peers who also served ELLs. Through these components, the project aimed to achieve its goal of preparing in-service secondary content teachers to improve achievement, literacy and language development of ELLs.

The courses for the program were selected collaboratively. The district identified their specific needs with respect to PD, and the university faculty selected the appropriate courses, drawing on PD research for ESL teachers and effective practices for teachers of ELLs. The curriculum for all three courses was tailored to the teachers' specific needs as secondary content teachers of ELLs in an urban district.

While the courses in Multicultural Education and ESL Methods lent themselves rather organically to application in the middle and high school classrooms, the SLA course did not to the same degree. A critical difference between SLA and the other courses (but most especially, the ESL Methods course) is that SLA is rooted in theory, rather than methodology. It was this disparity between the theoretical and the methodological that served as the impetus for the current study. For experts in the areas of SLA and ESL Methodology, the relationship between the two is clear: SLA lays the groundwork for ESL strategies. However, the practicing content teachers that this PD program served had difficulties seeing the connections, likely due to their admitted training preferences for practice and strategies over theories. As a result, we chose to highlight this relationship between theory and practice as an effort to bring to the fore this important issue in the literature.

Review of the Literature

Mainstream, content-area teachers need to be well-armed with the appropriate skills, pedagogical knowledge, dispositions, and orientations to best serve the specialized needs of ELLs in their classes. However, specific guidelines regarding the best ways of doing this are as yet unclear (de Jong & Harper, 2004; McGraner & Saenz, 2009). Although the existing literature specifying what teachers need to know is relatively small, there is general consensus that in order to teach language minority students well, certain characteristics are important, including knowledge of the structure of English, a foundation in linguistics and its application in the classroom, as well as an understanding of the processes of second language (L2) and literacy learning (de Jong & Harper, 2004; Dong, 2004; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005). Moreover, Lucas and Grinberg (2008) maintain that there are four language-related qualities that the teachers of ELLs need: (a) language-related (L-R) experiences, (b) L-R attitudes and beliefs, (c) L-R knowledge, and (d) L-R skills. The first two of these qualities may be inherent, or rather, acquired through life and world experience (although they can be developed, to be sure), while the second two are easily learned with high quality PD. That is, mainstream teachers who will be teaching mathematics, science, social studies, or other such courses to ELLs, need to have

certain dispositions as well as knowledge to help those ELLs in their classrooms to learn the academic language and content concepts. They are also responsible for content in ESL methods, SLA, biliteracy, multiculturalism, and other related knowledge. The response to de Jong and Harper's (2004) question: "Is ESL *just* good teaching?" is then, "No, it's not." Then, specialized training in the process of L2 acquisition is critical for ALL teachers of ELLs⁴.

While such specialized training is by no means a universal requirement in the U.S. (only Arizona, California, Florida, and New York have explicit policies about training for mainstream teachers of ELLs [Ballantyne, 2008; New York State Education Agency, 2001; Hansen-Thomas, & Cavagnetto, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007]), there is a change in the air with regard to the preparation of content specialists in their work with ELLs. More and more, school districts, schools of education, and state agencies are recommending that pre-service and in-service teachers receive training to better serve the needs of the ELLs in public schools (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). With linguistic diversity rapidly becoming the norm in U.S. classrooms (Enright, 2011), mainstreaming has become the most common, and arguably, egalitarian, method of inclusion to serve ELLs. So that these content specialist teachers are prepared in working with their language minority students, they must have a foundation in ESL content knowledge, most critically, SLA (Lucas & Grinberg, 2010; McGraner & Saenz, 2008; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005).

Second Language Acquisition is the study of how second languages are learned, as well as the factors that play a role in the language acquisition process. It is a relatively new field with origins in the 1960s that continues as a burgeoning discipline (Ortega, 2009). SLA is based on theory and research and provides the foundation for the practice in ESL classrooms. The SLA course that the teachers took drew upon fundamental and historical notions in SLA as well as up-to-date critiques, myth debunking, and new research. Topics addressed included the nature of learner language such as variation and error analysis; interlanguage; innatism, behaviorism, and interactionism; sociocultural theory; individual differences; the role of instruction, including strategy training, focus on form, academic and social language, among many others. The selection of these course components was made based on an exploration of the needs of the participant teachers in the school district served and the Texas English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) as well as on a review of literature relevant to both content and teachers' needs (Ellis, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Lucas & Grinberg, 2010; McGraner & Saenz, 2008; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005).

There is an undeniable link between the theory of SLA and the practice of ESL methods, which is supported by myriad researchers in the field (see Ellis, 2010 for a full description). However, as Ellis (2010) notes, "There is... no consensus on the nature of the relationship between SLA... and language pedagogy" (p. 183). Van Patten (2010) also agrees that there exists an expectation that SLA theory should be reflected in the classroom, but maintains that it should inform, rather than improve teachers' work. What is also clear is that there exists a divide between the theory and practice (Ellis, 2010). This divide is what makes SLA seem not relevant, hard to apply, and too distant from the classroom for teachers of ELLs, and especially for non-ESL specialists. Although some researchers maintain that there cannot be a divide between the theory and practice of SLA (see Lantolf, 2008; van Lier, 1994), teachers of ELLs in mainstream classrooms are usually more inclined to gain knowledge on practice, rather than theory (Ur, 2001; Williams, 2007).

⁴ See, for example, descriptions of specialized PD programs for mainstream teachers in Casteel and Ballantyne (2010, Eds.).

Research Questions

The questions anchoring the research for this study were: (1) Do content area teachers believe that they need and benefit from SLA theory classes? (2) If so, in what ways? We were especially interested in learning the ways in which the mainstream teachers were able to apply the theoretical knowledge they gained from the SLA course to improve their work with ELLs. So, we also asked: (3) How can theory be translated to practice? With the last question, we also aimed to learn not only *how*, but *what* the teachers learned that was of high importance to them in their practice: (4) What aspects of SLA are the most useful or relevant to teachers of ELLs?

Method

This mixed methods study relied on both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a full, descriptive picture of the participating teachers' beliefs regarding SLA and content area teaching.

Participants

In this study we had 37 participants for the survey (see Table 1 for the demographic information).

	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Female	34	91.9
Male	3	8.1
Age		
20-29	5	13.5
30-39	10	27.0
40-49	14	37.8
50-59	6	16.2
60+	2	5.4
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	5.4
Black	8	21.6
Latino	2	5.4
Other	1	2.7
White	24	64.9

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of categorical demographics

The 37 participants in this research were part of a grant-funded PD program for non-ESL specialist secondary teachers whose goal was to provide more effective education for the ELLs these teachers served. All 37 teachers taught science, math, social studies, special education, inclusion ESL or English language arts (see Table 2) at the secondary level in an urban Texas school district with an ELL population of more than 25%. The ELLs were primarily Spanish-speaking from Mexico, but included a great range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as Falan Chin from Burma, Arabic from Syria, or Dzongkha from Bhutan. While the majority of the teachers in the program taught large numbers of ELLs, most were not certified or trained to teach ESL, with the exception of having taken the SLA course and for some, a course in multicultural education.

Subject	No. of participants
Math	11
Social Studies	8
Science	4
ELA	12
Special Ed.	1
Inclusion ESL	1
Total	37

Table 2. Participants by subject taught

Data Collection

To collect data, an online survey (see Appendix) with open ended and Likert-scaled questions was administered. The survey was constructed based on the content of the class and needs of the PD project. Three questions provided demographic information of respondents. Ten Likert-scaled questions captured respondents' perspectives on SLA theories and their application, ESL support in their campuses, and on usefulness of SLA in their classrooms. Five open-ended questions were related to challenges working with SLA theories, i.e., relating the theories learned to their teaching practice, the teachers' previous experience with PD on SLA, participants' recommendations to other teachers on working with ELLs, and the applicability of SLA theories to mainstream content classrooms.

The survey was administered as a course final evaluation that was not tied to grades in any way. It was submitted by the students anonymously and uploaded to the electronic course platform used at our institution, Blackboard. Three cohorts of students in the SLA course participated in the survey.

Data Analysis

A two part approach to data analysis was taken to this mixed-methods study. Likert-scaled survey items were analyzed using SPSS v.15. Quantitative and results were reported as descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were analyzed for patterns and themes, as is common in qualitative research (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Those patterns and themes which emerged formed the basis of the qualitative analysis.

Results

The following results are presented in two sections: Quantitative and Qualitative.

Quantitative

The quantitative results section shed light on participants' agreement or disagreement with statements related to SLA applicability, ESL campus experts, benefits of SLA and SLA theories understanding, among others. In order to test for potential differences in scores from the quantitative questions, a within subjects repeated measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted (see Table 3). The item with the highest level of agreement was the one related to teachers needing to know about SLA theory ($M=3.81$, $SD=.40$), followed by 'communication strategies from content teachers will assist English Language Learners' ($M=3.76$, $SD= .43$), 'content teachers benefit from SLA theory courses' ($M=3.73$, $SD =.45$), and 'SLA theory contributes to my professional work as a teacher' ($M=3.65$, $SD=.54$). Agreement on items 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 helped respond to the first two research questions related to the need and benefit of SLA theories learning for content area teachers and how this benefited them.

Respondents agreed that SLA theory enhanced their practice by integrating content and language instruction for them.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Teachers need to know about SLA theory.	37	3.81	0.40
2. Communication strategies from content teachers will assist English Language Learners.	37	3.76	0.43
3. Content teachers benefit from SLA theory courses.	37	3.73	0.45
4. SLA theory contributes to my professional work as a teacher.	37	3.65	0.54
5. This class has helped me as a classroom teacher.	37	3.59	0.55
6. SLA theory integrates content and language instruction for teachers.	37	3.57	0.60
7. Linguistic abilities and academic achievement are related.	37	2.78	0.89
8. It is challenging to apply SLA theory in content classrooms.	37	2.57	0.69
9. Age is a factor in regards to Second Language Acquisition.	37	2.46	0.65
10. The ESL teacher/department is our campus expert regarding ELLs.	37	2.46	0.77

Note. Mean differences greater than .16 differed significantly, Summary of Multivariate Analysis, $F(9, 28)=22.48, p < .001, \eta^2=.878$

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for quantitative questions

Qualitative

Concerning qualitative data, open-ended questions revealed participants' reflections on the needs of SLA theories and their benefits, ways in which these theories specifically helped them as content teachers, how they translated theory into practice, difficulties they found when working with SLA theories, and what the recommendations of SLA applicability for colleagues were. Specifically, in the first broad theme regarding what teachers need and want with regard to SLA, participants focused on how SLA helped them to update their knowledge and skills and ultimately, to be more effective. They also indicated that SLA gave them a better understanding of ESL strategies, helped to clarify prior held misunderstandings, and held that it expanded their role as content teachers. In the second broad category relating to teachers' challenges participants highlighted specific challenges with SLA and those most useful aspects of it to their teaching. These reflections became the emergent themes in this study: 1) needs and benefit, 2) caveats, 3) application of theory, 4) aspects of SLA, 5) challenges, and 6) applicability of SLA for colleagues.

Need and benefit. The response to the first research question, "Do content area teachers (believe they) need and benefit from SLA?" was a resounding yes. In general, participants agreed that teachers, including those who do not serve ELLs, need SLA knowledge. In the following section, we will highlight some of the qualitative data that illustrates this assertion, and then show how other teachers agreed, but with caveats.

A couple of respondents highlighted the need of SLA in terms of knowledge about language development. One mentioned that:

PD should definitely include SLA theory since our students are coming from all over the world. Teachers need to be trained on how language develops so that they are more sensitive and knowledgeable of the stages children progress through during their learning.

While another respondent believed that:

...all staff members should receive PD on the subject of SLA. Linguistics should be part of the training that we receive... (it) was never even mentioned to me during the certification process.

From these and other similar comments, we understood that, in general, the mainstream teachers held positive attitudes toward learning about SLA in their PD.

Some teachers linked PD in SLA to a pressing need to update their knowledge and skills and better serve ELLs. One participant indicated that she felt “that in our society, teachers should have training on SLA theory. It should be a requirement due to the every changing population mix in our country”. Another concurred, stating that:

Teachers should be given SLA theory because there is a lot of misunderstanding among teachers. Teachers keep using outdated teaching methods because they believe they know the latest information on what they are doing. It is frustrating to try to implement new strategies with teachers believing in old strategies.

The need to be more effective in the ELLs’ classroom was also present in the respondents’ minds, and PD in SLA, they said, could help. One teacher mentions: “Having exposure to SLA theory provides insights on behavior, so I do think it is helpful... most teachers do not have a clue, and it is very important they understand the theories to be effective in the classroom”. Another felt that knowing about language was key in successful interactions with ELLs: “Teachers need to understand how to connect to ELLs to ensure success...to be successful, teachers need to know more about language”. However, while some teachers were highly positive about the need for SLA, others were more cautious.

Caveats. Some of the participants agreed that SLA theory was necessary and important, but focused on applications:

*I believe that SLA theory [**can** [emphasis added] be presented in PD conferences, however, it should be presented with **both** [emphasis added] theory and practical applications of the theory... That is the key-- providing to the workshop attendee something that they can utilize in their classroom to improve instruction, because to do less is to waste time and money of the teacher, as well as the district, and ultimately the taxpayers who are paying for their training.*

Clearly, this teacher was concerned about how the theory would be used to make a positive impact in the classroom and the schools overall. Another participant, focused on the manner in which theory is presented in PD settings, commented that “...theories must be framed in a learner-friendly way. Theories can be intimidating”. These comments further reinforced teachers’ desires for user-friendly as well as applicable knowledge. In the following section, the responses highlight the particular ways the teachers were able to use their new-found knowledge of SLA.

With respect to the second research question (In what ways do content area teachers need and benefit from SLA?), the participants provided thoughtful feedback. Specifically, the project participants described why SLA was useful, explaining that they had a better understanding of strategies and rationale behind the (research-based) practices that they use in the classroom. One teacher commented: “SLA theory gives me a better understanding of why we use the strategies that we do in our ISD [Independent School District]”. Others provided similar feedback, indicating that since taking the SLA course, they had had a strong foundation and clear understanding about the history and rationale behind research-based ESL methodology.

Teachers also indicated that SLA theory helped them by correcting or clarifying misunderstandings for themselves or even for other teachers. One teacher acknowledged that “Most often teachers are given the basic information on what should be seen in their classrooms,

but with no opportunity to clear up misconceptions or to guide instruction practices". This participant continued that:

I had always heard that it was easier for younger students to learn English than if you began later, and I cannot ever remember receiving instruction on acquisition order or how the affective filter/attitudinal factors relate to language acquisition.

That is, she was debunking a commonly held idea that younger learners are always better language learners, as well as addressing other important notions including order of acquisition and how attitudes and affect can play a role in the second language acquisition process.

So, the teacher was using the knowledge learned in the SLA course to evaluate how the SLA knowledge could affect the students, for ostensible practice in her classroom. Thus, the knowledge acquired in the SLA course they took helped the participants to elaborate on the importance of this and other sets of SLA theories to understand the needs of ELLs in the classroom L2 acquisition. One teacher indicated, "It is beneficial to know how to address and change the attitudes and motivation of our students", while another teacher mentioned colleagues' concerns when trying to address ELLs' needs:

I know that a lot of frustration that teachers often feel can be eliminated if they had a better understanding of the theory [SLA theories]. Teachers don't understand the needs of these students and if a student is not showing progress or becomes a behavior problem it is often times because they are bored or they don't understand and if teachers had professional development this could be recognized and dealt with before the student becomes a problem within the classroom.

Their new knowledge, then, helped the teachers to reflect deeply on long-held beliefs and encouraged them to relate this to their students in their classes.

A particularly interesting finding is that participants considered that SLA expanded their role as content teachers. A teacher expressed this insight by saying that: "Teachers should realize that we are not just content teachers. We are also language teachers. This means taking the time to prepare a lesson plan that is aimed at both content and language objectives". While in the previous comment, the teacher desired to expand into the role of a language teacher; in the following one, the teacher expressed an interest in becoming an action researcher:

Teachers who want to provide the best environment for their students will want to know SLA theory so that they may choose strategies that lead to success. In addition, they will be reflective teachers and collect data in their own classrooms. Using this information, they will observe and note behaviors and responses. This information can then be used to modify instructional strategies with students, making the teaching 'research-driven'.

Application of theory. Responses from participants addressed the idea that theory could be translated to practice (research question 3) in some ways. The apparent benefits of such translation were shown through the teachers' realization of the importance of engaging ELLs in learning through specific strategies and techniques. That is, the teachers addressed some aspects of SLA (research question 4) they thought could be useful to them as teachers. Many of these aspects were rooted in communication and interaction. A teacher expressed it in this way:

I will focus on both social and academic language, I will emphasize form-focus instruction, I will make certain that my ELLs read, I will pair my ELLs strategically, I will provide timely and positive corrective feedback, and most of all I will create an inviting and positive atmosphere.

Another mentioned that she would "make sure instruction allows output for SLA students, output should have a variety of free and controlled production". Similar comments by other teachers reflected their comprehension of how practice is rooted in research.

Participants' understanding of the language acquisition theory also led them to reflect on their assessment practices. A teacher proposed this translation of theory to practice:

I will assess the students based on their ability to communicate using academic language versus their social language. Last year I based my assessment of student improvement on social language without even realizing it. I failed to recognize that social conversation is not reflected in academic achievement.

There was a great sense of reflection on teachers' own practice in terms of connecting and translating theory for their own classrooms, but they also addressed how the theory learning affected the way they would teach their colleagues (in the turnaround training sessions).

Aspects of SLA. Other aspects of SLA cited by the respondents as being most useful, were generally process-oriented, dealing primarily with the longitudinal and very complicated nature of acquiring an L2, and with respect to how SLA could be applied to teachers' practice.

Language learning is a long, complex process. With their newly acquired knowledge of L2 acquisition process, teachers were able to generate reflective recommendations to their colleagues regarding the complexity of language development for their students. As one participant said "... if I had only one message to give a new - teacher (of ELLs), I'd remind them that language learning is a **process** [emphasis added]; it takes time, but it is so **very** rewarding [emphasis added]". Reinforcing this, another teacher suggested:

All teachers need to realize that learning a second language is not easy; just because a student can socialize with their peers does not mean they have acquired the academic language needed to write and think abstractly in their second language.

A teacher, understanding the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency, recommended: "...teachers must realize that conversational language does not represent the students' depth of academic language". Clearly, these teachers were able to explain in their own words the academic/social language dichotomy (Cummins, 1981). They also acknowledged the research which indicates that it takes much longer to be successful in the language of school (academic language, also called cognitive academic language proficiency, or CALP) than it is to be able to converse about non-academic topics (social language or basic interpersonal communication skills-BICS).⁵

Creating discussion and collaboration opportunities for ELLs is key for L2 acquisition.

As participants recognized the importance of PD on SLA for all teachers and, although challenging, of SLA application in the classroom, they were able to make recommendations to their colleagues. These recommendations were related to collaboration and conversation, and to making content comprehensible. One teacher suggested: "I believe that the most important thing for teachers to remember is that ELL students need opportunities for conversation". Another, however, warned: "This interaction, however, must be carefully planned, scaffolded, positively supported, reflected upon, and used to encourage further interaction both inside and outside of the classroom".

Showing a deeper understanding of the relationship between language acquisition and content comprehension, project participants were very specific about the type of strategies and tools they and their colleagues should use with their ELLs. A teacher mentioned: "Students can't learn what they don't understand". The same teacher further recommended:

...therefore, teachers should use various ways to make the subject matter clear through pictures, cartoons, realia, diagrams, maps, charts, graphic organizers, manipulatives, comparisons, translations

⁵ In recent years the BICS/CALP distinction has been criticized and ultimately revised (see Cummins, 2008), but it is still generally accepted that there is a difference between academic and social language for ELLs in school.

from bilingual dictionaries, explanations from friends who speak the same L1 who understand the concepts.

While these suggestions primarily addressed practical applications of SLA (such as strategies), they illustrated the teacher's comprehension of how L2 acquisition could be facilitated through such appropriate strategies. The teachers' language suggested that they have a keen understanding of how their knowledge of SLA theory was put into practice in their content classrooms. The link between theory and practice was thus seen here.

We found that an additional way that SLA benefited mainstream teachers was in facilitating their expansion of roles as language teachers and as educational/action researchers who take initiative to investigate issues of importance in their classroom, and whom are accountable to ALL of their students.

Challenges. The notion that SLA theory presented challenges in the translation from theory to daily teaching practice was, not surprisingly, a common theme throughout the teachers' survey responses. Most of the participants' comments dealt with their own issues in this regard, but also with their experience or beliefs regarding how they had (or would) used SLA in a PD training for their colleagues (a requirement of all the participants). In response to this idea of translating theory to practice, the teachers also addressed the importance of engagement and communication, and the emphasis on academic language and form-focused instruction as issues faced by the teachers in their own application of SLA.

Survey participants expressed that while they were in fact able to apply the SLA theory they learned into a practice in their classrooms, it was nonetheless challenging and somewhat difficult. Problems included issues with: (1) lack of background knowledge; (2) the idea that that SLA theory can be contradictory; (3) the multitude of new information, terms and theories from the discipline; (4) and the simple (or not so simple) matter of coming up with effective and innovative ways of applying the theory to their daily practice in mathematics, science, English language arts, social studies, and other such disciplines.

Specific difficulties the teachers experienced in working with SLA as novices had to do with background knowledge, be it the lack thereof, or the mismatch with differing kinds of background knowledge. One teacher indicated that having no knowledge of SLA made it hard for her to apply the theory, while another had a different view as it was "...difficult to break away from some of the preconceived notions that I had developed in regards to SLA". In this case, we saw that background information could be problematic for teachers, just as we know it is for students when learning new, challenging content.

Translating theory into practice also involved analyzing different and sometimes seemingly contradictory postulates. Teachers found this challenging because as a participant mentioned: "there is a ton of research that has been done on SLA. Sifting through it all ...has been a challenge". In a clear and straightforward exclamation, one teacher expressed his/her frustration: "So many names, so many theorists, and many conflicting theories!" From these comments, we gather that some of the teachers were overwhelmed with new and sometimes conflicting information in SLA.

Finally, a breakthrough occurred for some participants as they understood that, although challenging, they were able to translate SLA theories into their practice as content area teachers. One teacher's comment summarizes this agreement: "At first, I didn't understand **why** [emphasis added] teachers need to understand **theories** about SLA because I thought that ESL teachers only needed to know various strategies about **HOW** to teach ELLs [emphasis added]". This teacher's insight suggested that s/he realized the importance of understanding the reason

why theory supports practice. Others' comments reflected their ability to extrapolate best practices in ESL methodology, relating them to concepts they had learned in SLA.

Applicability for colleagues. Some of the respondents felt it was difficult to put all the different ideas about SLA into clear instructions for teachers, as in a PD session. Others reflected more globally, in reference to how district and state-mandated curricula can be developed for all teachers for a one-size-fits-all classroom. This reflection was seen in the following comment where the participant discussed Ellis' (1997) U-shaped course of development⁶, and about Pienemann's hypothesis⁷ (Ellis, 1997) related to learners' developmental readiness to successfully learn grammatical structures.

It is somewhat difficult to apply when a classroom of twenty students ranges widely in ability and learning readiness. If Pienemann's teachability theory and Ellis's U-shaped development are correct, and I believe they are, then it is almost impossible to prepare a curriculum for such a class under the constraints imposed by the state and the district. Each child would need individual instruction at some point in the day (or at least once a week) in order to assess where they are in their internal syllabus and what should be taught next, but there is no time or assessment for that at this time.

This reflective remark illustrated not only a clear understanding of some of the theories from SLA, but also how they are used to problematize important issues in education.

Overall, while many of the respondents admitted facing some challenges in conceptualizing ways in which SLA was useful and applicable to them, they ultimately did have a better understanding of it. Some participants were able to demonstrate these understandings in ways that illustrated application and synthesis of what they learned, namely information-based advice for educators.

Limitations

A limitation must be mentioned that it is the researchers' perspective that teachers' roles were changing and that the teachers became more effective as a result of their work within the SLA course. It is certainly possible and indeed plausible that the changes they acknowledged occurred as a result of other experiences, but the majority of the teachers were not receiving other PD related to SLA (or ESL) at the time. Further, the participants' comments were directly related to the content from the course, so it is expected that when citing SLA theories and information, it came from their work on the PD project.

Discussion

We found it insightful although somewhat surprising that overall, the content area teachers felt that SLA was important for them in their work with ELLs, and that many recommended SLA training for their content area colleagues, as well. It came as no surprise, however, that many of the teachers were challenged with the application of the theory.

In terms of the quantitative results, the most revealing were those in which the teachers were in consensus (i.e., that SLA theory helps them as teachers) and those which illustrated a shift in traditional thinking (i.e., ESL teacher as expert). Of these two findings, the latter was highly interesting, since many mainstream teachers have traditionally viewed the ESL teacher as the 'expert' with regard to ELL issues. A number of the content area teachers in our study (many of whom are not ESL certified) indicated that they believed they also had some expertise with regard to ELLs and their issues, and that the ESL teacher was not the only expert.

⁶ The learning pattern learners follow when they use a correct language form, then swap it with an ungrammatical interlanguage form, to finally return to the correct one.

⁷ This hypothesis states that learners reconstruct their L2 knowledge systems in the order they are capable of at their specific phase of psycholinguistic development.

In the qualitative findings, we saw an overlap and further explanation of some of the responses presented in the quantitative data. The rich layering of the teachers' reflective responses regarding their use of theory, how theory translates to practice, and the challenges and benefits that the theory brings them presented an illustrative picture of their beliefs and attitudes regarding SLA as a component of PD for mainstream teachers.

Thus, our study answered the research questions we posed to varying degrees. In terms of the question as to whether teachers needed and benefited from SLA, we surmised from the participants' comments that they do. With regard to the question of how theory could be translated to practice, there was a less clear cut response, however, our findings suggested that it was possible, but it depended on the teachers, their particular ELLs, and their needs. In terms of which aspects of SLA were most useful to the teachers, it appeared that the big notions related broadly to questions of how long it takes to acquire an L2, what the differences between academic and social language are, and what the role of interaction in SLA is, emerged as most important to the group with which we worked. While prior research (i.e., de Jong & Harper, 2004; McGraner & Saenz, 2009) indicated difficulties in pinpointing the aspects of SLA most useful to teachers, highlighting those 'big ideas' could be a first step in creating PD curriculum.

Addressing the educational divide between theory/research and language pedagogy, Ellis (2010) points out that researchers are concerned with what works overall, but that teachers, on the other hand, have to be concerned with the inner workings of their own classes; and that what we know from research is not easily translated into practice (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Stenhouse, 1975). While the work we have conducted in the present article corroborated the fact that it is NOT easy to translate theory to practice, it did suggest that the teachers valued the importance of the theory in their own daily practice.

Ellis (2010) believes that bridging the divide between the theory and practice may happen with teacher research and by making SLA accessible. For non ESL or SLA specialists such as the mainstream, secondary content teachers in our PD program, we worked to make the content accessible and applicable to them by embedding the theory in their classrooms. That is, the teachers put into use their newly-garnered SLA knowledge to understand how SLA theories applied to their U.S. born Latina/os, their well-educated Chinese seventh graders, or their newcomer Falan Chin speakers, to learn how to help the students' development, and then share the knowledge with their colleagues in the SLA class. In this way, the teachers became not only experts in theory (and in the application of it), but also became researchers.

Conclusions

The implications of this study then, suggest that SLA can be an important component of a high-quality PD program for mainstream, in-service, content area teachers of ELLs, and that the teachers can gain valuable knowledge and expertise in working with ELLs. SLA is useful to teachers, but the specific SLA-related content in a PD curriculum will depend on the teachers' students, and their needs. Nevertheless, including the 'big ideas' that highlight how long it takes to acquire an L2, the role of interaction and communication in SLA, and others, is an important component of a PD program. Critical to successful implementation of an SLA course is the application of the theory to the teachers' classroom and daily practice. Allowing teachers the opportunity to work closely with the theories to understand how their own students are experiencing second language learning in their content-classrooms will help the teachers see the relevance of SLA for them.

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Appendix: SLA Survey

1. Are you:
 - Male
 - Female
2. Age:
 - 20-29
 - 30-39
 - 40-49
 - 50-59
 - 60+
3. Ethnicity:
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Black
 - Latino
 - Native-American
 - White
 - Other
4. Communication strategies from content teachers will assist English Language Learners.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
5. It is challenging to apply SLA theory in content classrooms.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
6. This class has helped me as a classroom teacher.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
7. Age is a factor in regards to Second Language Acquisition.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
8. The ESL teacher/department is our campus expert regarding ELLs.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
9. Content teachers benefit from SLA theory courses.

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**

10. SLA theory facilitates integration of content and language instruction for teachers.

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**

11. Linguistic abilities and academic achievement are related.

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**

12. SLA theory contributes to my professional work as a teacher.

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**

13. What kinds of difficulties have you found working with SLA theory?

14. Describe any professional development experiences with SLA theory. Should professional development for teachers include SLA theory? Why or why not? Feel free to provide examples.

15. Based on what you have learned in this class about ELLs, what do you think is the most important information for all teachers to know in working with ELLs?

16. What instructional practices can you apply from SLA theory into a mainstream content classroom to best meet the needs of ELLs?

17. Describe your experiences as a classroom teacher addressing SLA with ELLs.

18. Teachers need to know about SLA theory.

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**