
SIOP HELPS, BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH

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Although Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) cites robust empirical support, this approach in meeting the needs of English learners should be understood to be only one of several tools that schools could use to support ELs. SIOP has inherent limitations in the extent to which it can meet learner needs. Administrators who choose to implement SIOP need to be familiar with such limitations, and also develop their own research-based understanding of second language acquisition to increase opportunities for ELs. This paper reviews some of the tenets and features of SIOP and critically evaluates them from an implementation standpoint based on current understanding of second language acquisition.

Keywords: K-12 English learners, language acquisition, language instruction, SIOP

In serving both the curricular and linguistic needs of K–12 English learners (ELs), Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2017) has become an increasingly accepted model of instruction in the United States. In professional development seminars with classroom teachers, however, I have heard the concern from many ESL practitioners that the adoption and implementation of SIOP in schools is conducted in such a way that results in diminished benefit for ELs as well as the downsizing or perceived redundancy of ESL specialist services. Underlying causes for this concern include, but are not limited to, a misunderstanding of SIOP parameters and the pressure to streamline school services to meet budgetary constraints. Because of this growing unease, it seems clear that before binding decisions are made about resources in language learning, there should be a fair reckoning of the issues involved. Most important, for the benefit of all parties involved in EL education—that is to say administrators, content teachers, ESL specialists, and ELs themselves—a more nuanced understanding of SIOP should be sought. SIOP does represent a strong and credible step forward in supporting ELs for K–12 purposes, but it does as well have limitations and potential pitfalls, especially when implemented and maintained by non-language specialists such as content teachers and administrators. Because of these drawbacks, SIOP should always be understood to complement and not replace ESL services.

Language and Content Instruction in Schools

With the growing numbers of ELs attending schools across the United States, K–12 professionals seek out methodologies and resources to better serve learner needs. The primary challenge is that schools must simultaneously attend to learners' curricular needs, as expressed through college and career readiness requirements such as the Common Core State Standards and operationalized through content courses like science, history, and math, and at the same time attend to learners' linguistic needs, which can range from day-to-day survival beyond the walls of the classroom to participation in specialized academic discourse (Brisk, 2015; Schleppegrell, 2004; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). This double duty is demanding on teachers and school resources, and arduous for the learners themselves.

Content-based instruction (CBI) and sheltered instruction (SI) models aim to simultaneously provide both content and linguistic instruction to varying degrees, thereby standing in contrast to the submersion model, where ELs are placed in content classes and receive no specialized language services, or in pull-out models, where ELs attend content classes with no linguistic support but are then “pulled out” for a dedicated language support period, either daily or several times per week. In the United States, CBI and SI are seen by many schools and indeed many ESL professionals as a great step forward in servicing ELs, particularly because learners’ curricular, cognitive, and linguistic needs are systematically addressed, and the educational institution is better able to meet the assessment, curricular, and policy guidelines propounded by the state.

As a form of sheltered instruction, SIOP is increasingly valued in this regard; it does, after all, attempt to provide “a resource for planning and implementing high-quality lessons for English learners and other students—lessons that will prepare students eventually for college and careers” (Echevarría et al., 2017, p. ix). In doing so, it draws on a strong research base in both second language acquisition research and general education. Many ESL specialists and content specialists alike would agree that SIOP “is just good teaching” for all learners, not just language learners. And because SIOP is a protocol, there is a likelihood that all parties guiding the EL’s total academic experience orient around the same beneficial practices.

Second Language Development

For ELs, there are language-specific components of SIOP that are uncontroversial in second language acquisition (SLA), and even considered to be essential for acquiring a second language. These include—but are by no means limited to—repeated, authentic engagement with comprehensible input, interaction, output, feedback, and metacognitive training (Echevarría et al., 2017). Appropriately, then, SIOP asks the teacher to do the following:

- Improve comprehension of language input through various teaching strategies.
- Provide opportunities for learners to participate in authentic, extended reading or listening; authentic interaction; and the production of language for authentic purposes.
- Provide repeated exposures to the same linguistic material.
- Provide feedback on the formation of the language produced by the learner.
- Provide metacognitive training. Metacognition, specifically metalinguistic function, has been shown to benefit older learners, i.e., middle school or above. (Lightbown, 2008)

These interventions are more than just linguistically supportive factors; they make up some of the fundamentals of language development, whether or not instruction is provided. It is important to note that, when instituted in the context of content classrooms, these interventions address contextualized and academic domain-specific language ability.

It is well established that second language development is complex, nuanced, and unpredictable in terms of process and outcomes (Hall, 2017; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Lightbown, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; VanPatten & Benati, 2015; VanPatten & Williams, 2015). ELs need large amounts of exposure to authentic and comprehensible conditions of language use in order to have the *potentia** to acquire the diverse, nuanced attributes of a second language. In most cases, however, learners also need a combination of targeted pedagogical intervention and authentic communicative practice to help move aspects of the acquisition process along, particularly those aspects associated with the subtleties of academic language (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2004). Even with the provision of such opportunities and interventions, however, linguistic success for ELs is not guaranteed (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Han, 2014; Lyster, 2017; VanPatten, 2004; VanPatten, 2014)—particularly in preparation for success in an academic environment. In light of this acknowledgement, the central question becomes whether SIOP is adequate as a sole intervention to meet ELs’ linguistic needs for academic purposes. In response, I next consider some of SIOP’s intended design features and potential pitfalls in implementation.

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

SIOP does not tout itself as a one-stop language solution for ELs. According to Echevarría et al. (2017), “[e]ffective sheltered instruction is not simply a set of additional or replacement instructional techniques that teachers implement in their classrooms. Instead it draws from and *complements* methods advocated for both second language and mainstream classrooms” (p. 17) [emphasis added]. Thus, the focal point of this statement is one of complementation, not control. From the outset, the authors themselves make it explicit that SIOP is intended to bolster quality language programming, not replace it.

The danger of not providing comprehensive and robust instruction is that many ELs will likely slow or cease the development of certain facets of their language, often at the intermediate level. In fact, Echevarría

et al. (2017) recognize that prematurely attenuated language instruction is problematic for learners. They state that “many English learners plateau at the intermediate level, in part because they are exited prematurely from ESL programs, but also because when they are exited, they don’t have teachers who continue to develop academic language while teaching content” (p. 233). On the one hand, this statement frames SIOP as valuable support for learners who exit from ESL programs, and not as a preclusion of ESL programs themselves. On the other hand, however, this statement speaks to a well-established understanding in SLA that aspects of language development often slow or stop when basic communicative needs of learners are met, especially when interlanguages are not pushed (Han, 2004; Kowal & Swain, 1997). It also suggests that academic language development requires intentional, longitudinal intervention (Cummins, 1983), and that many features of language, whether they are for social or academic purposes, benefit from or likely depend on pedagogical intervention to increase the likelihood of acquisition (Brisk, 2015; Ellis, 2009; Han, 2013; Lightbown, 2008; Lyster, 2017; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Valuable pedagogical interventions can take many forms, but two that are significant in promoting language development from an SLA perspective are attention-raising to form-meaning-use relationships of language (Schmidt, 1990), and corrective feedback (Lyster, 2017). SIOP takes a proactive step toward attention-raising by implementing language objectives as a prominent lesson feature; concerns about this intervention from both a linguistic and an implementation perspective remain. First, in SIOP, though Echevarría et al. (2017) *do* direct teachers to identify language objectives in accordance with state English language proficiency and language arts curriculum standards, their treatment of language objectives does not seem to delve much more deeply into expectations than attending to “pronunciation and sentence structure” (p. 233). These descriptors are deeply insufficient as objectives, linguistically speaking, and are rendered even more inadequate if left to operationalization by non-language specialists. My own experience in ESL teacher preparation has shown that non-specialists have great difficulty recognizing task-relevant dimensions of language as learning targets in academic settings, which necessarily affects whether learners are able to do the same. In addition, SIOP’s determinations of language objectives, at least on the surface, seem to be driven by curriculum or standards instead of by actual learners’ linguistic behaviors. Of course, content and learner needs should each be attended to, but assessment of learner need, linguistically speaking, cannot be perfunctory and requires specialized training in linguistic structure, language development, and language assessment. Because ESL teachers are best positioned to have received such training, their input is necessary to complement content-area teacher efforts.

As with language objectives, SIOP’s guidance on corrective feedback is linguistically underspecified (i.e., only pronunciation and sentence structure), as is *how* feedback can be delivered. SIOP advocates for modeling and paraphrasing through two forms of feedback, both of which involve restatements or recasts

of a learner's response in terms considered academically "correct." While potentially helpful, these guidelines can be problematic because learners need to interpret feedback as intended for linguistic form, and teachers need to be mindful that this takes place. When a learner's intent is on communicating meaning—as is the predominant mode in content classrooms—that learner is not predisposed to thinking about linguistic form unless there is a compelling reason to do so (Long, 1996). Lyster's (2017) discussion of immersion classrooms in Quebec showed that much of the teacher feedback in his study served to address the content of the lesson (i.e., the facts of the content area), and that feedback was most often directed toward content knowledge repair and rebroadcasting to the rest of the class for emphasis purposes; learners were therefore predisposed to misinterpreting the intent of feedback when it was linguistically driven. In addition, where feedback is concerned, it remains an open question whether the content teacher, who may also be oriented toward content, will systematically push learners to reformulate in a way felicitous with language development.

The result is that content classrooms, even with implementation of SIOP, are problematic in terms of their orientation toward learners' language challenges. In this respect, both proactive and reactive strategies that align with learners' current linguistic needs are perhaps best addressed in ESL-specialized time and space. To this point, even Echevarría et al. (2017) suggest that "if you want your student to start using the correct pronunciation and sentence structure, you need to dedicate some time to teaching and practicing sentence structure and pronunciation" (p. 233). Nonetheless, the realities of K-12 content classrooms suggest that even linguistically informed content teachers have limited opportunities to dedicate adequate time to teaching language.

The potential limitations and pitfalls of SIOP also need to be considered from an administrative or supervisory perspective. To what extent do administrators who conduct observations of content teachers tune into the linguistically relevant behaviors in teacher performance? I would ask content teachers to consider how many of their own supervisors and administrators have received specialized language pedagogy training, not just SIOP training. It is likely that an administrator is as oriented around content and general education pedagogy as the content teacher, and is therefore less likely to attend to or value linguistically relevant moments during observations. When the same administrator observes multiple classrooms in such a manner, we have the beginnings of a systemic learning-opportunities-lost scenario.

Conclusion

It has been argued here that the linguistic needs of English learners are complex and should be addressed with consistent, intentional pedagogy as systematically as possible throughout the learner's academic experience. A content-motivated model like SIOP is a valuable means to meet learner needs in the K-12 setting overall as long as its limitations in design and implementation are recognized. Advanced ELs who are soon to exit or who have already exited ESL services may not qualify for or even wish for intensive language support, but support is nonetheless helpful to optimize their academic experience. SIOP is well suited for this purpose. ELs whose proficiency is designated as the port of entry through high intermediate need targeted language support, best delivered in a time and space where language is the focus, and ESL services therefore are a better solution in this regard. Those same ELs, however, also need a means to make their mandated content classes linguistically beneficial. Here, SIOP is a staunch support.

Teachers and administrators interested in the intersect between content instruction and targeted language support might also explore other models of instruction. For example, Lyster's Notice, Awareness, Guided Practice, Autonomous Practice model (Lyster, 2017) advocates for a more integrated, but purposefully intensive, *counterbalanced approach* to content and language instruction. Whatever the intervention, learners need a language pedagogy that is mindful, systematic, and resilient against the competing pressures of the K-12 environment—one that is conducted as a complement to what is otherwise an overwhelming content orientation in schools. Ultimately, teachers and administrators need the time, skills, and knowledge to focus on the linguistic challenges of their learners. While content curriculum demands burn bright in the eyes of educators and staffing budgets shrink, it is critical that we do not lose sight of the linguistic needs of learners. SIOP can be supportive and effective, but dedicated language services such as ESL cannot be abandoned.

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Notes

*Unless otherwise indicated, all italic emphasis in nonquoted text is by the author of this paper.



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