Improving Reading Achievement of ELLs One Conversation at a Time: Implementation of the IC Model in Upper Elementary School Classrooms—Voices from the Field

Rebecca K. Hixon, Ph.D.
University of Georgia, Athens, GA

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CLASE

ABSTRACT

This study used a multiple-case study approach to examine the complexities of implementing the IC Model of teaching in upper elementary classrooms, which has been found in previous research to have a positive impact on the achievement outcomes of ELLs and others, particularly in reading. After conducting both a deductive and inductive thematic analysis across four cases (i.e., teachers), fourteen themes of interest were identified in relation to teacher practices, challenges, and external factors that affected the implementation of this model. Lastly, these themes are discussed in terms of their broader meaning and significance, their relation to previous literature, and their implications for practice, research, and theory.

BACKGROUND

- Over the last few decades, an **enormous rise in immigration** has been witnessed. The number of immigrants in the U.S. has more than quadrupled since 1970, growing from 9.6 million to 41.3 million in 2013 (Zong & Batalova, 2015a).
- This is **mirrored by a rise in the Limited English Proficient (LEP) population**, which comprised about half of the immigrant population in 2013, with 25% living in households with incomes below the national poverty line and where Spanish was the most dominant language spoken (Zong & Batalova, 2015b).
- Consequently, at the school level, the **number of Hispanic students enrolled in public schools is on the rise**, as evidenced by an increase from 8.6 million in 2002 to 12.1 million in 2012 (NAEP, 2015). Within the English Language Learner (ELL) student population, Hispanic students constitute the majority with Spanish the most common first or home language spoken by 71% of ELL students.
- Despite Hispanic students' progress in achievement over the past 20 years, **achievement gaps still exist between Hispanic and non-Hispanic whites** (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011).
- When compared to their non-ELL peers, ELL students often tend to be at higher risk for performing poorly academically, especially in the domain of literacy (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; Kieffer, 2008).
- With the increase in diversity within our nation's schools, there is a **growing need for instructional approaches** that enhance learning and raise achievement, particularly in reading, for groups of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. August & Shanahan (2010) call for better comprehensive interventions that **"accommodate the language learning and literacy needs within the same classroom of students with diverse skills and capacities"** (p. 345).

THE IC MODEL
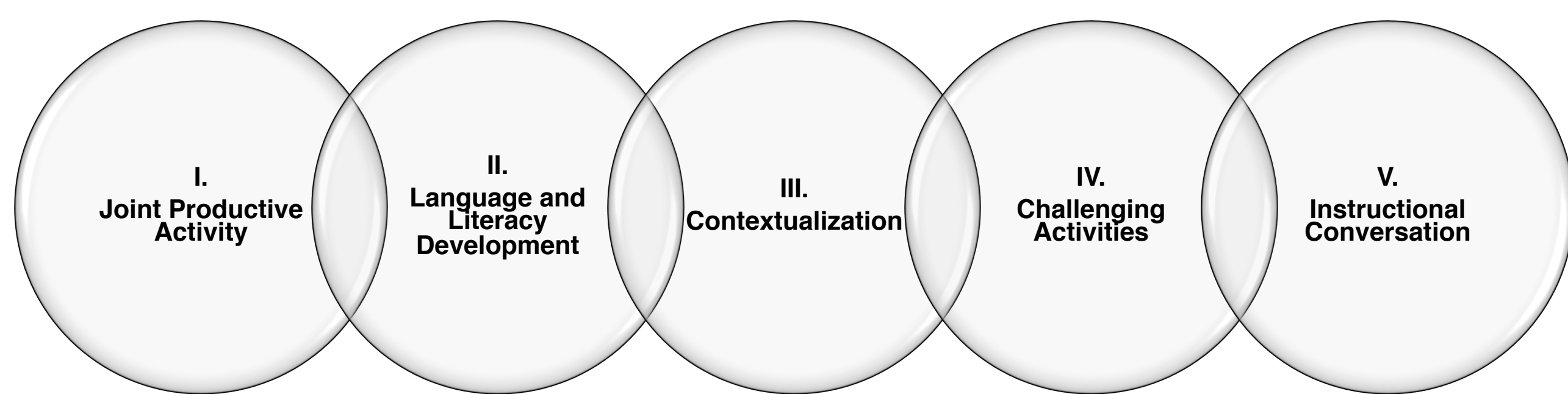
- A comprehensive classroom pedagogy focused on **collaboration and conversation** as a means of teaching instructional objectives through regular **small-group dialogue** with students.
- Anchored in both **sociocultural** and **cognitive-developmental theory**– focused on human **learning and cognition as a function of social and cultural processes** rather than a strictly individual process
- Grounded in the **five standards for effective pedagogy** identified by The University of California Berkeley's Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence (CREDE) (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Situated within a larger research project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), this study is an extension of a randomized control trial (RCT) conducted by the Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education (CLASE). The goal of the larger study was to examine the effects of the Instructional Conversation (IC) model for improving the academic development of third and fifth grade English language learners (ELLs), predominantly Latinos, from high poverty elementary schools in Northeast Georgia. Specifically, the CLASE team was looking at the effectiveness of this approach on students reading achievement scores as measured by the CRCT and the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Preliminary findings from the first two cohorts of this RCT are demonstrating promising results (Portes, Gonzalez-Canche, & Boada, 2016).

The current study examines the implementation of this teaching model in classrooms where teachers had high fidelity of implementation and whose students outperformed students in business-as-usual classrooms on state achievement outcomes, particularly in reading. The **goal of this study** is not to generalize but **to better understand and document the complexities of teacher practice** in an in-depth way to provide insights and practical considerations that will aid in the future implementation of this model.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2014) with four cases in total, where the *teacher* was the case, investigated within the IC context, to answer the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** How do teachers implement the Instructional Conversation (IC) model in their classrooms? (What do they attend to before, during, and after an IC?)

> **RQ2:** What are the major challenges in implementing the IC model?

> **RQ3:** What conditions or external circumstances affect the implementation of the IC model?

Participants
Participants included four treatment teachers from the original RCT study—two third and two fifth—who demonstrated high levels of fidelity and whose students outperformed controls on state standardized tests, particularly in reading (see Portes et al., 2016). Literal replication logic was employed (i.e., all four cases demonstrated "exemplary outcomes" related to the research questions and the goal was to look for direct replications across cases)

	Gender	Grade Taught	Proficient Languages	Years Teaching Overall	Years Teaching ELLs	School %ELL	School %free lunch	District %ELL	District %Free Lunch
Case 1/ "Kasey"	Female	5	English	19	9-11	20%	79%	16%	52%
Case 2/ "Victoria"	Female	5	English/ Spanish	12	9-11	10%	66%	8%	61%
Case 3/ "David"	Male	3	English/ Spanish	5	3-5	43%	93%	16%	52%
Case 4/ "Olivia"	Female	3	English	12	3-5	2%	58%	12%	79%

Data Sources
Data sources included documents (teacher surveys), observations (video recordings of IC lessons), and interview transcripts. The first two data sources were collected during the larger RCT study and follow-up interviews were conducted after the RCT study completion to get a deeper understanding of some of the practices observed and reported.

Analysis
Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected throughout the study. The 6 phases of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), were applied to all three data sources. Both *deductive* (focused around the pre-determined standards of this model) and *inductive* (focused on topics generated by participants) codes were applied to all four cases and themes were identified across all 4 cases that represent a broader synthesis of the findings for each research question.

FINDINGS

Through the cross-case analysis of the principal findings included in each of the individual case reports, as well as the summary across cases, fourteen themes of interest were identified that represent a broader synthesis of the findings in consideration of the implementation of the IC model.

RQ 1: Implementation Practices
Regarding *practices that cut across the individual standards themselves in relation to implementing the IC model in a systematic way*, the following themes were identified: **(1)** Setting Up the Classroom, **(2)** Purposefully Planning, **(3)** Integrating the Standards, **(4)** Intentionally Listening, **(5)** Engaging in Reflective Action, **(6)** Debriefing Activities, and **(7)** Creating Student Agency.

RQ2: Challenges
In terms of *challenges teachers encountered while implementing* the IC model in their classrooms, the following themes were identified: **(8)** Learning to Let Go and **(9)** Attending to Group Dynamics.

RQ3: External Factors
External factors– *variables outside of the model that affected the implementation* of the IC model in teachers' classrooms– are categorized into factors that enhanced and factors that hindered implementation. In terms of external factors that *enhanced implementation*, the following themes were identified: **(10)** Administrative Support and **(11)** Access to Resources.

In terms of external factors that *hindered implementation*, the following themes were identified: **(12)** Time Constraints, **(13)** Inconsistent Expectations at the Administrative Level, and **(14)** Being the Only One.

CONCLUSIONS

- Although the IC approach is well documented in terms of theoretical framework and application (e.g., Goldenberg, 1991; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Saunders and Goldenberg, 1999) literature on the implementation of the full IC model that incorporates all five standards in upper elementary grades is underrepresented.
- Findings suggest that teachers' ability to implement the IC model is very much dependent on the actions they take *before* and *after* an IC, as well as the strategies they employ *during*. While each individual standard is supported in the literature and widely acknowledged as effective teaching, it is the *integration of these standards in systematic way* in the classroom that results in the quintessential responsive, reciprocal nature of this pedagogical model.
- A variety of themes were identified representing strategies employed that went *beyond the five standards* and helped to make the enactment of this model operate as a unified system. These practices set the ground work for successful application of the individual five standards and act in an iterative process where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- Findings also suggest that *administrator support* and *opportunities for collaboration* where there is not only one teacher on a grade level (or in a school) are important key factors to the sustained implementation of this model.
- The value of the study lies in capturing the essential concrete practices that high implementing teachers demonstrated in enacting this model. These considerations for applicable actions are an important contribution to the field in moving the larger agenda forward in terms of helping to address the challenge of translating abstract theoretical ideas to concrete practice in the classroom to help raise the achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Center for Latino Achievement & Success in Education
College of Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

For more information, please contact Rebecca Hixon at rgokee@uga.edu.