



Using a Teacher Self-Reflection Model to Enhance Language and Literacy Instruction for Multilingual Learners

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Abstract

Approaches to teacher professional learning (PL) have evolved considerably over the past two decades with the goal of more effectively engaging educators in the type of learning needed to meaningfully impact student achievement. Although traditional, or one-shot, approaches to PL are still used in schools, they rarely result in meaningful changes in teaching behaviors. Research has shown educators benefit from PL that is ongoing and job-embedded, and actively involves teachers' collective participation [9][22]. Additionally, self-captured video-reflection represents a transformative tool for enhancing teachers' practice [19][30] with the potential to improve teachers' ability to notice, evaluate, and shift their behaviors to better meet the needs of their students. As part of a nationally funded initiative aimed at improving teaching for multilingual learners (MLs), we developed professional learning community model that emphasized teachers' critical self-reflection and collective action-planning to improve instruction for MLs. Participation in the year-long cycle involved educators' use of guided reflection protocols and collaborative problem-solving meetings to engage in reflection-action cycles. The researchers describe implementation examples and findings regarding the model's feasibility, value, and usefulness to participating teachers. Data sources include surveys, focus group interviews, formal classroom observations, and teacher learning artifacts (i.e., written self-reflections). Findings suggest that self-reflective components of the model were perceived positively and were highly beneficial in promoting teacher change to better meet the needs of MLs.

Keywords: *Teacher Professional Development; Multilingual Learners (MLs); Self-Video Reflection; Literacy; Professional Learning Communities*

1. Introduction

Integrated opportunities to practice language alongside literacy and interact with peers around texts are critical to multilingual learners' (MLs) success in school. Educators of MLs need meaningful professional learning (PL) opportunities not only to build knowledge of effective language and literacy teaching but also to develop positive perceptions of MLs and their academic potential [18][27]. In effective educational systems, educators have regular PL opportunities to think critically about their instructional decisions, observe how students use their linguistic and cultural strengths during classroom instruction, and evaluate the impact of their teaching practices on students' learning [11][28]. In achieving these goals, systematic self-reflection represents a highly contextualized learning opportunity for educators to "refine their pedagogical thinking" and enhance practice [3].

As part of a federally funded project, we collaborated with a community of practicing educators in a Southwestern U.S. school district to develop a feasible and valuable model for enhancing the early literacy experiences of MLs in grades Pre-Kindergarten (PK) to three. Through this research-to-practice initiative, participating educators developed their professional knowledge of how to meet the language and literacy needs of MLs through their participation in a reflective PLC model that emphasized critical self-reflection and collective action-planning. Participants' experiences were documented by through surveys, interviews, teacher learning artifacts, and formal classroom observations. The purpose of this paper is to describe the model development process and present findings on educators' perceptions and experiences of the model, as well as the model's feasibility and value to teachers' professional growth.

2. The Reflective Practitioner: Teachers' Own Classrooms as Powerful Sites for PL

Approaches to teacher professional learning (PL) have evolved considerably over the past two decades with the goal of more effectively engaging educators in the type of learning needed to meaningfully impact students' success in schools. Research has shown educators benefit from PL that



is job-embedded and includes time for teachers to apply new knowledge to their classroom teaching with targeted and ongoing support [9][8][22]. Additionally, effective educational systems foster a professional culture of learning, recognize teacher agency, and build teachers' capacity to lead and mentor [4] [7][16].

One common framework for supporting job-embedded PL is the establishment of campus professional learning communities (PLCs), defined broadly as "a form of professional development in which small groups of educators with shared interests work together with the goals of expanding their knowledge and improving their craft" [10]. In the U.S., PLCs are widely used as part of school PD culture, although they are not always clearly defined in their purpose and structure. When implemented well, PLCs provide a structure for ongoing, job-embedded learning that engages educators as active and reflective participants [8] and research has demonstrated a correlation between the use of PLCs and the improved quality of teachers' professional learning and their instruction [14][31].

In conceptualizing our approach to PLCs, we viewed teaching as a situated practice [17] by which expertise is furthered through the "process of increasing participation in the practice of teaching" [2]. From this perspective, teachers' own classrooms are viewed as powerful sites for their professional learning, and PLCs can be utilized as a framework for teachers to analyze their own practice and collectively pose solutions to teaching and learning issues [19]. Further, when educational leaders establish collaborative PLCs structures in which educators feel safe to critically examine aspects of their teaching, structured self-video reflection can "generate new meanings" about their experiences in the teaching profession through collegial dialogue [15].

2.1 Integrating Teacher Self-Reflection into PL Models.

Teachers' ability to evaluate the complex interactions that occur during teaching and "make connections between specific events and the broader ideas they represent" is needed to develop expertise in the profession [28]. Educators of MLs, specifically, need opportunities to think critically about their instructional decisions, examine their preconceptions about students, and cultivate a deeper understanding of students' linguistic knowledge [11][18]. Not surprisingly, video technology has been increasingly utilized as a valuable tool for enhancing teachers' reflective practices [24][29], as it offers highly contextualized opportunities for educators to evaluate different events that occur in a lesson, reconsider their assumptions, and refine their pedagogical thinking [3]. Video recording has been shown to improve teachers' ability to notice and address teaching behaviors of which they were not aware, or for which they are not provided evidence during real-time teaching [25][15]. Additionally, studies have shown that the reflection process is enhanced when it includes clear learning goals, orients teachers to specific events of significance in their lessons and pushes beyond simple evaluation to *action* [15][19].

In our approach to developing a reflective PL model, we viewed self-captured video as a potential mediating tool for educators in noticing, understanding, and enhancing expressive (speaking and writing) language development opportunities for young MLs. Productive and meaningful classroom discourse in K-12 classrooms remains a concern among researchers and educators [20] and using video for increasing the quality of classroom discourse has been shown to be effective [6]. Thus, in developing the PL approach for the project, we aimed to explore the potential of teacher reflection for raising their consciousness of the quality of classroom talk and ways they can enhance it to support successful expressive language development. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the project and describe the components of the Reflective PLC model.

3. Overview of Project ELEVATE

Project ELEVATE represents a federally funded capacity-building initiative focused on improving the effectiveness of educators that serve MLs in grades Pre-K through 3. This researcher-practitioner collaboration began by engaging educational leaders in a southwestern school-district in a collaborative project focused on enhancing teachers' read-aloud practices for young MLs in elementary school. Researchers had a long-standing relationship with one of the instructional administrators in the district and had collaborated on previous initiatives in initial development of the core model components [21][22]. The read-aloud enhancements for MLs included: (1) previewing reading texts and activating children's prior knowledge and lived experiences, (2) providing high-quality linguistic input by pre-teaching key vocabulary/language concepts, (3) using nonlinguistic representations to support acquisition of new language concepts, (4) engaging children in meaningful,



structured language practice around culturally relevant texts, and (5) facilitating high-quality classroom discourse [12]. In implementing the last two enhancements, teachers were trained to use “turn and talk” routines in which student pairs practice new language and make meaningful connections to text.

To support the successful implementation of these focal practices, educators participated in a Reflective PLC model that stressed collaborative inquiry, structured self-reflection, and peer-collaboration as a means of improving knowledge and increasing effectiveness. During the first year of the project, research staff worked collaboratively with educators and school leaders at one elementary school to pilot, evaluate, and refine the PLC model through an iterative feedback process. Subsequently, the refined model was fully implemented across two elementary school sites. This paper reports on the first full-implementation year (Year 2) with 50 educators across grades PK through 3.

3.1 Project Context and Participants

We partnered with two sites located in a suburban consolidated school district in a region in which MLs are the fastest growing student population. Two elementary campuses participated in Year 2. Both sites serve an ethnically and linguistically diverse student population; 25% of students are classified as “emergent bilingual” (EB) at Site 1, and 41.3% at Site 2. Site 1 also serves as a Pre-K cluster site, serving over 100 prekindergarten students across attendance zones through both dual-language and ESL instructional programming. Students classified as EB were served through a district-wide program model in which they were gradually transitioned from primarily Spanish instruction (grades PK-K) to primarily English instruction with Spanish support as needed (grades 1-5).

Educator participants included 48 teachers and two instructional coaches (ICs) across the two elementary schools. Teacher participants included educators across grades PK-3. Twenty-two of the 48 teachers were bilingual speaking (English/Spanish), and 11 teachers delivered instruction primarily in Spanish. The remaining 26 participants were monolingual English speakers with additional certification in English as a Second Language (ESL). The group’s years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 20+ (1-5 years [n=20]; 6-10 years [n=10]; 1-15 years [n=5]; 16-20 years [n=6]; over 20 years [n=7]). Ten of the teachers had master’s degrees at the time of the study.

3.2 The Reflective Professional Learning Community (PLC) Model

The Reflective PLC model developed through this project integrated peer collaboration, practitioner reflection, and teacher-driven action planning to support teachers in increasing their knowledge of how to: (1) address the language needs of MLs, (2) implement culturally and linguistically responsive, evidence-based instructional practices through an Interactive Read Aloud Routine, and (3) skillfully modify and enhance their practice based on knowledge gained from a *reflection-action* practice.

Initial model development drew on Desimone’s (2009) core conceptual framework for professional development that includes: (a) a content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence (d) duration, and (e) collective participation. Additionally, we drew on the concept of “transformative reflection” [19] to integrate a reflective component into the PLC model. Drawing on this theoretical basis, we fully developed the PLC model using an iterative development process that emphasized meaningful stakeholder collaboration (district and school leaders; educators) to design, refine, and fully develop the professional learning content and model components. Figure 1 below shows the fully developed model, followed by a description of the yearly cycle.

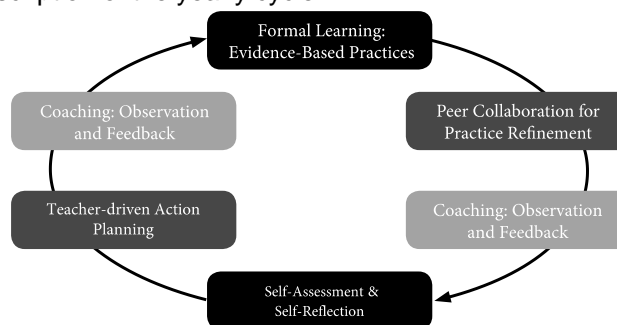


Figure 1. The Reflective PLC Model Components, Yearly Cycle



The yearly PL cycle begins with formal learning that builds teachers' knowledge base of evidence-based instructional practices for MLs' language and literacy development. Following initial training, educators begin implementing the practices and participate in collaborative grade-level PLC meetings to share early implementation experiences, target obstacles or challenges to initial implementation, and collaboratively plan next steps. Throughout the year, coaches observe teachers' language and literacy instruction for MLs and provide meaningful, targeted feedback to enhance teachers' success with the model. Knowledge gained from the observation and feedback process is shared in PLC meetings.

Approximately mid-way through the year, teachers engage in two phases of self-reflection through video in which they used insights gained from self-observation to make specific enhancement to their lessons. As part of the model design, we developed systematic tools for self-reflection that orient teachers to examine events of significance in their lessons, and push reflection beyond educators' mere evaluation of teaching events and extend it to *action*—that is, to use it for achieving transformation in teachers' current behaviors or practices [5][15][19]. Using the developed protocols and tools, project researchers engage participants in two *reflection-action* cycles, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

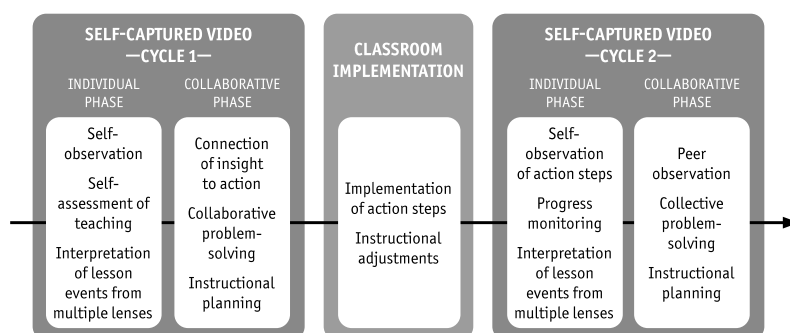


Figure 2: Reflection-Action Cycles and Activities

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Various sources of teacher-level data were used to examine key questions around teachers' perceptions and experiences with the model and its value to their professional growth in meeting students' language and literacy needs. Data sources included: (1) focus group interviews, (2) one end-of-year educator survey, (3) formal classroom observations, (4) notes from teacher debriefs, and (5) teacher learning artifacts. Classroom observations were conducted by project staff at the beginning, middle, and end of year. Approximately 4 teachers per grade level (across the two sites) were randomly selected for observation at each time period. Teacher learning artifacts collected for analysis included teachers written self-reflections and action plans developed as part of the self-reflective process.

The teacher-level data sources described above were a means to document participants' trajectory as they engaged with each component of the PL model, implemented the target practices for MLs, collaboratively addressed obstacles to implementation, and described their perceptions of the model and aspects of their professional growth that led to successful implementation. A mixed methods approach was used to identify areas of convergence and divergence between the quantitative and qualitative data sources. Qualitative data analysis involved the constant and continuous comparison of the data sources [13][26] to identify salient themes that emerged around teachers' perceptions and how they interpreted the changes in their knowledge and practice that resulted from their participation in the ELEVATE model. This approach began with basic category construction, then as data (survey responses, teacher learning artifacts, and observations) were subject to constant comparison, categories were further nuanced to capture similarities and differences within and among the various data sources.

5. Findings

5.1 Teachers' Perceptions of the Model's Value

Findings suggest that self-reflective components of the model were perceived positively and viewed as beneficial in promoting successful implementation of the target practices for MLs. Results from teacher surveys showed that the model was valued by educators and had a high social validity.



Participants evaluated the usefulness of the different job-embedded PL components to their professional practice, the results shown in Figure 3 below.

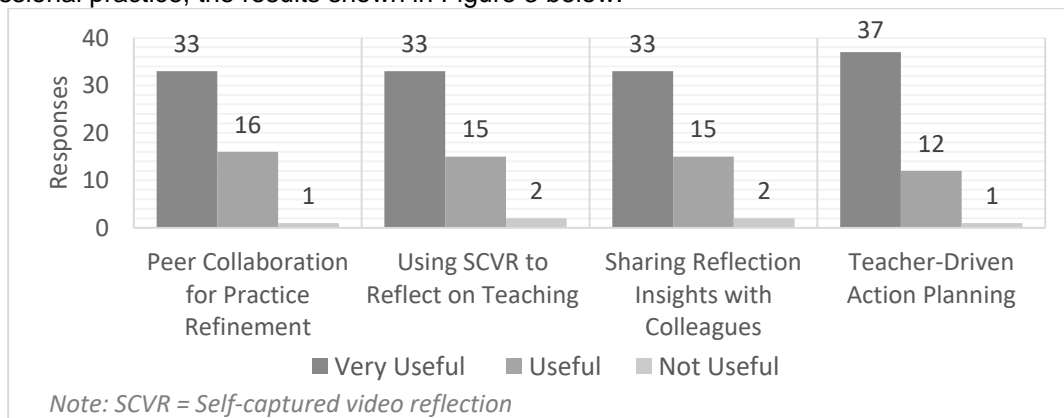


Figure 3: Usefulness of Reflective PLC Model to Teachers

Analysis of qualitative data corroborated survey results, suggesting that teachers highly valued the PL activities to their professional growth. Educators perceived the peer collaboration opportunities offered through the ELEVATE model as useful and spoke to the benefits of “having time” to discuss and share implementation experiences with their colleagues and problem-solve around challenges. As one educator put it, “I learn the most from my fellow educators.”

Additionally, teachers found the structured self-reflection process meaningful to their practice, and they saw value in viewing their own classrooms as sites for professional learning. Participants described the overall benefits of self-reflection in terms of accessing a “different lens” and “different perspective” on their teaching, viewpoints that provoked them to re-evaluate their own practice more critically. As illustrated in the participant examples below, teachers developed greater consciousness of aspects of their teaching, including those they initially thought they were “proficient in,” and they perceived self-video as an opportunity to address areas of their practice they desired to improve:

“I have seen a great deal of growth [through video] in areas that I thought I was proficient in.”

“I still see areas I can grow and improve on. I am always trying to be a better teacher and my students are benefitting from this read aloud routine.”

“I really enjoyed watching the video over because it allowed me to see the routine from a different perspective. I was able to notice little things I do not usually catch from the front of the class.”

Overall, self-captured video and reflection represented a mediating tool in teachers’ evaluation of “their own practice in the process of the change” [23] and, through structured support in developing a reflection-action practice, participants engaged in PL that was teacher-driven and individualized to their own unique needs.

5.2 Teachers’ Shifting Beliefs, Perceptions, and Behaviors

Deeper analysis of qualitative data suggested that educators’ ability to think critically about different lesson events and interactions and “reconsider their assumptions” was beneficial. Teachers’ participation in the PL model provoked shifts in beliefs and behaviors related to the amount and quality of talk during lessons, their unconscious habits related to classroom interaction, and assumptions about students’ learning and level of engagement.

Through systematic reflection of their own implementation, teachers were able to notice and address interaction patterns they came to recognize as ineffective. Teachers observed instances in which they unnecessarily relied on teacher-talk, overly “controlled” classroom interaction, and missed opportunities for students to use and practice language in meaningful ways. In this regard, video served as a tool for making the unconscious conscious, honing teachers’ focus on specific behavioral shifts they desired to make in their lessons, as these two examples from teachers’ action plans illustrate:

“I used more teacher-talk than I thought. I need to minimize my teacher talk and give the students more opportunity.”

“I want to make more opportunities for my students to turn and talk to discuss one another, rather than just me. I want to be more of a facilitator of their discussion rather than the one leading everything.”



In other instances, teachers developed a deeper awareness of their choices when it came to how they arranged communication in their classrooms, noticing issues of imbalance or inequity:

"I think it's interesting to get an outsider's perspective of yourself teaching. It's such a difficult thing to do well because your sole focus is if students are paying attention and taking in material. It was interesting to see that I would maybe call on the same person, or not call on specific kids. It was also interesting to hear myself speak so that I was able to notice if I was redirecting too much redirecting when it wasn't really necessary."

As in the previous examples, video served as a consciousness-building tool for teachers noticing and addressing areas of their practice they were not fully aware of during real-time teaching. Deeper examination of their teaching provoked participants to reconsider prior assumptions, not only about their own teaching but also about students. Teachers noticed themselves calling on the "same kids" because they perceived specific students "more willing to participate" or more "engaged" than others. However, through deeper analysis of their video-recorded lessons, teachers were confronted with evidence that contradicted their beliefs and were provoked to re-evaluate their initial assumptions:

"I realized that students that I perceived to be off task were excited about the read aloud, and they were talking to their partner about the book. I was surprised about how engaged they were, even if they were moving more."

Similar instances in which teachers' perceived students as "off task" then were confronted with evidence to the contrary in their videos surfaced frequently during PLC discussions and in teachers' written self-reflections. At times, teachers expressed "surprise" to see their students engaged, using the new vocabulary, and "giving so many great answers," suggesting that certain students' observed success with the read-alouds was not always expected by teachers. In this way, video became a lens into students' assets and strengths which, during real-time teaching, were overlooked or missed due to deficit-oriented assumptions about students. These beliefs informed their real-time decisions when it came to who they offered opportunities to speak.

Participants' reflections suggest that video was tool for reconciling competing ideologies and served as a "connection point between teachers' knowledge and his or her actions" [23]. Through regular collaboration in PLCs and ongoing reflection, participants collectively planned ways to structure meaningful speaking opportunities for students, as well as how to adjust their own teacher behaviors to support them.

5.3 Teachers' Perceptions of their Own Professional Growth

The Reflective PLC model, specifically self-video reflection and action-planning, was designed to support teachers in assessing their own teaching, planning for enhancement, and evaluating the impact of instructional enhancements on students' language use. Analysis suggested that teachers perceived the model as beneficial to their developing knowledge and professional growth. By the end of the project year, observed participants had increased their fidelity to the read-aloud practices compared to the beginning of the year, and the majority of participating teachers reported that their confidence level in implementing target language and literacy practices for MLs increased. Table 1 shows reported response of 46 teachers who completed the survey:

Target Instructional Practice	Confidence Level		
	Increased Significantly	Increased Somewhat	Level is the same
<i>Integrating culturally relevant texts into literacy instruction</i>	67% (31)	33% (15)	0% (0)
<i>Previewing reading texts to activate students' prior knowledge</i>	80% (37)	20% (9)	0% (0)
<i>Previewing reading texts to make connections to students' lived experiences</i>	78% (36)	20% (9)	2% (1)
<i>Providing high-quality linguistic input by pre-teaching key vocabulary/language concepts</i>	89% (41)	11% (5)	0% (0)
<i>Using non-linguistic representations to support acquisition of new language concepts</i>	83% (38)	15% (7)	2% (1)
<i>Engaging students in structured language practice through turn and talk routines</i>	78% (36)	22% (10)	0% (0)

Table 1: Teachers' Reported Confidence in Implementing Target Practices for MLs at End-of-Year

Analysis of qualitative data support the survey results, and teachers spoke to a sense of increased comfort and confidence as they completed their year with the project. As one teacher put it, "I feel really good about my implementation...my overall delivery is much smoother than from the beginning



of the year.” Others spoke of “more flow” with the lessons as a whole becoming “smoother and faster” compared to the beginning of the year.

Further, teachers connected the growth observed in students to their sense of success as teachers. As the year progressed and teachers examined their lessons more deeply through reflection-action, they were able to identify areas of students’ progress and confidence in language use:

“I feel really great about my overall delivery, and the change I’ve seen in my students’ use of vocabulary. They are much more confident in meaning of abstract words because they own the gesture and are confident using the words in the correct context.”

“I feel like I have shown improvement with certain areas, and I can tell that my students feel more comfortable and confident when answering questions and sharing with their partner.”

Teachers’ perceived students’ growth in the areas of new vocabulary and expressive language use (speaking and writing) as key benefits of the ELEVATE model. Analysis of teacher learning artifacts, written self-reflections, and action plans suggested they strongly valued the model’s focus on language development through interactive read-alouds, and they observed meaningful growth in students’: (1) confidence in initiating productive talk with their peers, (2) “ownership” and use of new vocabulary concepts across content areas, and (3) meaningful connections to text during classroom interactions. As one teacher put it:

“I feel as if the students have grown immensely when it comes to finding meanings of vocabulary words and implementing them into their daily lives. The students have shown growth in literacy conversations - conversations that contribute to the text at hand.”

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to better understand how the development and implementation of job-embedded PL model that emphasized reflection, active learning, and collective participation was perceived among practitioners. Research has well-documented the gaps in teachers’ typical classroom discourse practices and how teachers’ perceptions of students can limit learners’ access to critical expressive language development opportunities [1][6][27]. This study suggests that the reflective PLC model holds promise for the implementation of a feasible and valuable framework for increasing teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and developing a critical reflection-action practice. Further, findings showed that, following participation in the model, teachers perceived the PLC as not only a space to collectively address the challenges that come from meaningful change to their practice, but also a space in which they were held accountable for addressing prior assumptions, for translating insights into action, and for maintaining professional respect toward their colleagues and a respect for the process of improving the quality of instruction for their students.

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