One Book, One IEP: An Integrated Skills Project for Intensive English Programs

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on a One Book: One IEP project at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which developed from a desire to incorporate an integrated skills approach into a segregated skills curriculum. We provide a rationale for using this approach, discuss the implementation of its three essential components, report the project outcomes, and offer recommendations for similar future projects.

Rationale

Clearly, in authentic use, language skills are integrated. We talk about what we read, and we write about what we hear. This is as true in an academic context as it is in "real life." Students write papers based on lectures and give presentations about what they read. The receptive skills (listening and reading) are always evaluated through production (writing and speaking).

Although the advantages of integrating skills in language teaching and learning are widely recognized (Abrams, 2014; Hinkel, 2006; Oxford, 2001), most Intensive English Programs (IEP) are structured so that skills are clearly divided into separate courses. Unlike what students will find in their credit-bearing university courses, IEP curriculum and materials may isolate and divide language skills into reading, writing, listening and speaking; separating these skills into discrete courses. This structure may curtail IEP instructors' ability to integrate students' language skills in a realistic manner that reflects how those skills will actually be used once students are fully matriculated into their university...
The One Book: One IEP project was, therefore, principally developed to overcome barriers of a traditionally structured IEP by integrating skills through a theme-based project. As this project developed, it also incorporated aspects of literature circles and extensive reading.

A theme-based instructional model is one way to integrate skills in a discrete-skills program. Freeman et al. (2016) suggest six reasons for using a theme-based approach: it is more comprehensive, the content is connected, the same vocabulary is used in multiple contexts, students are more engaged, teachers are able to differentiate based on language proficiency, and it helps teachers make connections to students’ interests and understandings. Although more common in the K-12 field, Stoller (1999) suggests language learners enrolled in an IEP program that is not integrated will benefit from a theme-based instruction because it integrates subject-matter with language instruction, integrates their skill-based classes to reflect the environment they will find in their regular courses, and develops their content-based knowledge and expertise.

Using a novel as the center of the theme-based model lent itself to incorporating literature circles into speaking and listening class. Literature circles are student-led, small-group collaborations focused on students’ independent reading material (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles are quite prevalent in elementary classrooms and can be particularly beneficial for language learners (Lin, 2004). There are multiple ways to organize literature circles, but the One Book: One IEP project included student choice of reading material, regular meetings, student-led discussions, a focus on personal response and connections, and student self-evaluation. Although literature circles are quite prevalent in K-12 classrooms, there is little information about using this process with language learners at the college level (Sambolin & Carroll, 2015). In their research, Sambolin & Carroll (2015) found positive effects of using literature circles for college ESL classes including an increase in participation and collaboration.

Additionally, focusing instructional practices around a common book allowed the reading teacher to incorporate limited elements of the extensive reading approach (Day & Bamford, 2002) in reading class. These aspects include giving students a voice in choosing their own reading material, providing some variety in reading assignments, and avoiding the sometimes difficult and detailed analysis.
of the intensive reading tasks found in most textbooks. According to a meta-analysis by Takayuki (2015), “the available research to date suggests that extensive reading improves students’ reading proficiency and should be a part of the language learning curricula.” Teachers hoped this project would encourage students to read, at least in part, for pleasure and enjoyment of the story, that the reading would become its own reward.

**Project Implementation**

This project was conducted with two sections of high intermediate level students in the IEP at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, involving 4 teachers and approximately 25 students. It was closely modeled after the One Book projects many cities and states use to foster both reading and community. In these programs, usually sponsored by local organizations such as libraries or newspapers, community members select a book, usually by vote. Then, sponsoring organizations develop programming such as discussion groups, lectures by invited speakers, and hands-on activities designed to bring the community together around a common text. For the purposes of this project, one book was selected as the theme, and classroom activities in all skill areas centered on the book. The project was done alongside regular classroom activities and was completed in four weeks.

Implementation involved three essential components: teacher collaboration, integrated in-class activities, and level-wide programming. At the beginning of the semester, teachers in all skill areas (reading, writing, listening/speaking) came together to develop project outcomes. Essentially, teachers wanted students to have the opportunity to do more independent reading, use English to discuss and analyze ideas based on the novel both orally and in writing, and learn about the local community and American culture. Our theory of action became to center instruction in all skill areas about one theme so students would increase their participation in and enjoyment of independent reading, use their English skills to discuss and analyze information orally and in writing, and become better connected to their community.

It continued with all teachers working together to carefully select a slate of three books from which students would choose one they wanted to read. In selecting the books, teachers considered four...
things: student reading levels, student interests, relevance to students' lives, and opportunities for providing programming such as invited speakers or field trips. Reading teachers then provided their classes with a brief synopsis and description of each book. Students voted, and in this case, chose to read *Night of the Twisters* by Ivy Ruckman.

*Night of the Twisters (790L)* is a novel based on the true story of a series of as many as five tornadoes striking the Nebraska town of Grand Island on the same day in 1980 killing several people. It focuses on the experiences of one family before, during, and after the tornado, and provides not only an exciting story, but also one view of American family life, and information about a topic certainly relevant to international students studying in Nebraska.

After the text was selected, teachers coordinated closely to create a timeline all classes would adhere to in order to assure a logical progression of activities.

The timeline was based on existing curricular goals and classroom schedules but was very purposeful in that activities were integrated across skill areas so students could see the connections between their classes. For example, on Mondays, the morning reading activities were designed to facilitate the afternoon speaking/listening class discussions. The writing activities were then scheduled on Tuesdays so students could incorporate into their writing what they had discussed the previous day. Generally, level-wide programming that included guest speakers occurred during class at the end of the week.

Once the schedule was established, skill area teachers were each responsible for creating specific in-class activities, which met both curricular goals and were directly related to the book. Reading class teachers incorporated materials and developed activities to build background knowledge about Nebraska weather, climate patterns, and small town life. They gave very short weekly quizzes to ensure that students completed the reading and to check for understanding. They also provided direct language instruction for talking about literature to clarify questions students had about theme, characters, plot development, or vocabulary. At the end of the project, students read newspaper articles from the local Grand Island newspaper, which told the "real story" of the disaster and recovery.
The listening/speaking classes, which are combined at UNL, focused on discussion of the novel through weekly discussion circles guided by Looking into Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels (2002). After viewing videos of sample literature circles and establishing norms for book discussions, students engaged in weekly literature circles. Each week, students were given specific roles to prepare for the discussions. These roles changed every week, but group members remained the same. The roles were used for helping students initially understand the process. As students became more comfortable with the process, they were less reliant on the roles and role sheets and began to facilitate more natural discussions about the book. At the end of each discussion circle, students completed a self-evaluation and teachers provided specific feedback to students.

Finally, composition classes brought it all together using the text as the basis for writing weekly summaries of parts of the text students found to be the most interesting or the most powerful. The writing teachers also used this project to develop skills for note-taking and writing persuasive essays. Incorporating ideas from the discussion circles, students were more easily able to understand opposing viewpoints, identify counterarguments, and select the strongest arguments supporting their own viewpoints.

The final component of the project was level-wide programming. This involved bringing together all intermediate-level classes for two presentations; one given by a meteorologist about tornadoes and one given by a Red Cross Disaster Relief Specialist who provided a detailed look at the aftermath of a Nebraska tornado. The programming not only exposed students to authentic speech by native speakers, but brought relevance and immediacy to the topic. Skills area teachers were able to develop activities based on these presentations which reinforced curricular objectives such as note-taking, participating in large group discussion, and asking for clarification.

**Project Outcomes**

One Book: One IEP was well received by teachers and students. Teachers compiled, reflected on, and analyzed their experiences throughout and after the project during regular meetings. Given the relatively small number of students, teachers felt that a student survey focusing on qualitative measures

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would provide the most useful insight into student experiences. Three main results from this project were
the following benefits: an opportunity to integrate skills within the established curriculum, increased
student engagement in authentic reading opportunities, and positive student outcomes.

For teachers, the nature of the activity (theme-based) easily connected with regular curriculum
and classroom activities. For example, in the speaking/listening class, one of the units focused on
volunteerism. Building on the American Red Cross disaster relief presentation, the teacher developed a
poster session project around volunteerism. Students researched and presented about different volunteer
activities on campus. One group was so inspired by the American Red Cross’s relief work that they
focused on donating blood though the local bloodmobile. These types of activities, developed as a result
of the One Book project, related directly to program curriculum.

This project also appeared to foster a greater interest in and enjoyment of reading for students. It
was the first time many students had successfully completed an entire novel in English. One student
commented, “This is my first time read a whole book in English. I would be happy to read an English
book again.” Another student remarked, “I hope to read the real and realistic novels happened in the
towns or in America, because I have learned through my reading the culture, way of life, dealing with
accidents and family bonding in America.”

Finally, students also shared that integrating the skills helped them in their development of
English language skills. One student wrote:

My experience reading the novel *Night of the Twister[s]* was amazing. This is my second time
reading book by my second language, English. I like this experience because I did many activities
during reading it such as voting on the novel, also we listened to a guest speaker-Red Cross and
meteorologist. All these activities were so helpful. All quizzes we did in the [reading] class were
helpful because it's help me to write summaries.

As of result of this project, students appeared to see the connections among skill areas and understand that
activities in one class could help them develop skills in their other classes. For instructors, this outcome
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was essential as it was the ultimate goal of the project, helping teachers emphasize to students how to capitalize on what they learn in all classes to strengthen their English language skills.

Recommendations

Recommendations for implementing a One Book: One IEP project are fourfold. First, the active involvement of all teachers at the targeted level strengthens project cohesion. Regular communication between teachers is necessary for the project to flow smoothly and coherently. Second, developing sufficient background information and context for the text enhances student comprehension. Students often need support to understand content that is culturally based and teachers should be prepared to provide it. Additionally, providing sufficient support for literature circles increases students' ability to participate in them meaningfully. Many students have not previously participated in in-depth small group discussions and require modeling and practice to fully understand what is expected of them and to receive maximum benefit from sharing ideas and questions with each other. Finally, it would be interesting to learn what the results of a quantitative analysis of a larger-scale One Book project could demonstrate about effects on student reading, discussion, and writing skills.

This project began as a conversation among teachers to find a way to better integrate their classes. It resulted in a rigorous and enjoyable project for both students and teachers. Students reported more engagement in classroom activities and a better awareness of program cohesion. Teachers also reported more student engagement and apparently higher-level outcomes from students. This project could easily be adapted to any type of authentic reading material and would benefit students at all levels of English language skills.
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References


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Michelle Gadbois is a lecturer at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has an extensive background in teaching in both K-12 and higher education.
Brooke David began teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Omaha Public Schools in 2002. In 2005, she moved to Boston, MA where she completed an EdM and CAGS in Literacy and Language Education from Boston University. During that time she worked as a family literacy adult instructor, a director of an adult education program, and as a high school ESL teacher. After completing her degrees, she moved back to Nebraska where she worked for three years in the Intensive English Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She now works as a Title III Consultant for the Nebraska Department of Education.