



## Language experience camp: Connecting schools, students and families in southeast rural Georgia

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For four years, ESOL teachers in Effingham County have partnered with Georgia Southern University to provide a no cost Language Experience Camp for English learners and their families. Our Language Experience Camp has three goals: 1) provide continued language development opportunities, 2) develop a sense of connectedness among ELs, their families, the school system, and the larger community, and 3) create a fun and engaging learning environment. It has become a place where students and families connect with ESOL teachers and the ESOL director as well as students from across the county. It is an example of how one county has adjusted to their changing student demographic in a way that supports students academically and also helps them integrate socially. opportunities.

*Keywords:* language development, family engagement

**Although the concept of summer camp** is not necessarily innovative, a summer camp for English learners (ELs) and their families in a large, rural county in southeast Georgia is certainly novel. The Language Experience Camp in Effingham County has become an integral part of a comprehensive system proven to support English learners and their families in a context where the number of English learners is on the rise. For

the past four summers English learners and reclassified English learners have been invited to attend a week long language experience camp the first week in June. Each summer the camp had a different theme: Biomes, Bridges, Inventions, and Aviation respectively, but all camps focused on developing language, incorporating hands-on activities, taking field trips, and including family members. Across the years, teachers, students and families have benefitted from the extended time focused on language development in a fun, interactive learning environment. What started as an aspiration to connect families and develop language has become a tradition that English learners and their families look forward to every summer.

### **Why Summer Camp?**

Effingham County is like many counties in the New Destination South (Licheter, 2012; Massey, 2008), experiencing an increase in the number of immigrants and English learners in its communities and schools. Currently, English learners attend their neighborhood school and are served by on-site or itinerant ESOL teachers. As with most ESOL program models, there are benefits and drawbacks in providing services to students at their neighborhood school. One benefit is that upon exiting the ESOL program, students are able to remain at the school where they have established friendships and are comfortable with routines. One of the drawbacks of this model is that English learners are “sprinkled” across schools in this large, rural county. While some schools have as many as 30 ELs, others only have one or two. English learners in these low-incidence contexts receive individual support from an itinerant ESOL teacher daily, but can often feel isolated from their peers and the larger school community. Further, many families of these students are unfamiliar with the U.S. school system and

have had limited school-based interactions as a result. Although English learners in high-incidence contexts had larger social networks to assist them in achieving social and academic success, the spring semester often meant less instructional time with their ESOL teacher due to the need for ESOL teachers to administer the ACCESS assessment, and students' need to take the Georgia Milestones assessment.

All of the above factors were discussed at an ESOL program meeting just prior to the winter break in the fall of 2013. As an observer during this meeting, I asked the teachers what they thought could be done to address some of their concerns. How could we expand social opportunities for ELs and their families as well as provide intensive continued language development support? Their response...summer camp.

We then started imagining and describing what our ideal camp experience would look like. Most important to teachers was that camp should be fun and there should not be any tests. Informal assessments were fine, but typical paper/pencil tests were to be avoided. They also wanted the opportunity to spend extended time working with students in a semi-structured environment so they could engage in activities without the constraints of a strictly scheduled day. If their students were ready for a break, they could take a break. If students were engaged in an activity, they wanted the flexibility to be able to continue the activity through its completion. They wanted the time and flexibility to integrate authentic language learning opportunities into project-based, hands on activities. Finally, ESOL teachers and the ESOL director all agreed that we needed to find a way to build community among the families of ELs. They recognized that families are instrumental to the academic success of their children and wanted to build connections among families and between families and the school system. Based

on these requirements, we developed three primary goals for our Language Experience Camp: 1) provide continued language development opportunities, 2) develop a sense of connectedness among ELs, their families, the school system, and the larger community, and 3) create a fun and engaging learning environment.

## Language Development

Although minor adjustments were made each summer based on content and teacher preference, there were three central tenets to our language development approach: vocabulary development, scaffolding complex linguistic structures with



sentence frames, and multiple authentic experiences for oral and written language production. These tenets helped ESOL teachers bring language to the forefront of standards-based instruction (Rubinstein-Ávila & Leckie, 2014).

Vocabulary terms related to each summer's theme formed the foundation of what language students produced; whereas sentence frames and aligned graphic organizers provided structure for oral and written language production. The selected terms and language structures were essential, but even more important was our emphasis on student produced language. Collaborative tasks, authentic audiences, student produced videos and vocabulary infomercials provided relevant and meaningful ways for students to practice academic language.

A description of some of our activities can help illustrate the ways we integrated vocabulary, sentence frames and language production into camp activities. Our first summer focused on habitats in Georgia and included field trips to the Savannah Wildlife Refuge and Skidaway Aquarium. Prior to each field trip, teachers taught relevant vocabulary and content using a variety of grade level appropriate activities. While on the field trip, student pairs had tablets that they used to take pictures and videos of wildlife and habitats. The morning after each field trip students uploaded their pictures and video into Moviemaker, a free movie making software. In pairs, students worked on their Georgia Habitats video throughout the week by adding captions and narration. At the end of the week celebration several student videos were shown on a large screen and each student was given a DVD to take home.

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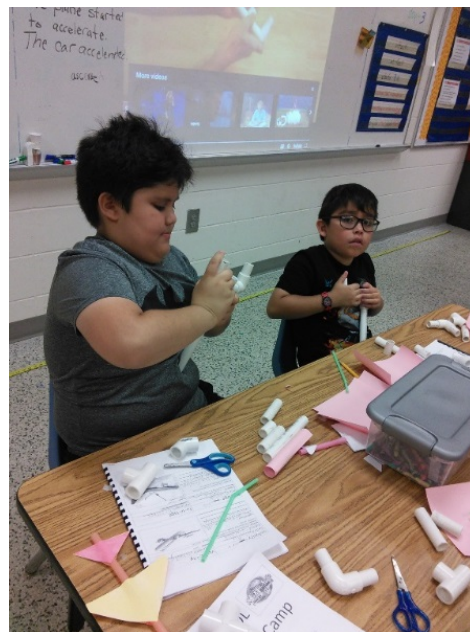


Figure 1: Manuel and Maron construct rocket launchers

copy of their video on a DVD. Similarly, these past two summers we again used language production. This middle/high school vocabulary infomercials and sentence frames for Aviation themes. Students in the younger grades acted out the infomercials many of which were based on the projects

developed in their respective classrooms. For example, *inclined plane*, *momentum*, and *velocity* were described through a demonstration using the “Mars Rovers” second and third grade students were making. Instead of individual videos, students received a DVD

containing all of the vocabulary infomercials. Although traditional vocabulary instruction and pencil/paper activities did occur, the variety of contexts and incorporation of technology provided meaningful and authentic reasons for students to practice and produce academic language.

### **Creating Connections: Field Trips, Celebrations and Parent Engagement**

Development of academic language was our primary focus, but we also wanted to enhance the sense of connectedness among English learners, their families, the school system and the local community. Because Effingham is such a large, rural county with a relatively small number of ELs spread across it, we wanted to use summer camp as a way to connect families and increase their comfort level with the ESOL director and several ESOL teachers as the schools each ESOL teacher serves can vary from year to year. Parents and other family members were invited to participate in all camp activities but primarily chose to attend field trips and the end of camp celebration. Not only did field trips provide authentic opportunities for students to learn and practice language, they allowed families to visit places many had never been before. Field trips included the aforementioned Savannah Wildlife Refuge and Skidaway Aquarium our first year along with the Wildlife Center and Mechanical Engineering labs at Georgia Southern University the second year and a morning of outdoor inventions and an afternoon of bowling the last two summers. Each field trip was semi-structured and allowed ESOL teachers to interact with families in a setting outside of school and facilitated interactions among parents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

This past summer, we augmented our family component by integrating a family literacy component two afternoons. Each day we developed a “Make and Take” activity

related to our theme of Aviation. Parents arrived about an hour early and used the directions and materials to make a hot air balloon mobile one day and a rocket that used Alka-Seltzer tablets as fuel the next. After they made their own, parents took directions and materials home so they could make another with their child later on in the summer. The friendships parents made with each other throughout these activities have extended into subsequent school years and continue to endure.

### **Summer Camp - NOT Summer School**

The third goal for our Language Experience Camp was to create a fun and interactive learning environment. It was for this third reason that we determined “summer camp” was a much better term to use than “summer school”. Even though academic language and state science standards guided our curriculum development, we focused on integrating small group work, games, technology, demonstrations and competitions to keep students engaged and to promote language production. During our Bridges themed camp, for example, students made arch bridges, I-beam bridges, and suspension bridges out of a wide variety of materials from marshmallows and Laffy Taffy to cardboard tubes and string. The final day consisted of a bridge building challenge in which students were given a bridge building context and access to materials such as pool noodles, boxes, string, and duck tape to build the best bridge for their specific problem. When parents arrived, students described their context and justified why their bridge was the most appropriate. These types of activities were possible because of the loosely structured context, the parallel thematic instruction across grade levels, and the focus on language production throughout the week.

## **Funding and Logistics**

Once we realized the many advantages of a summer camp for English learners and their families, we needed to find funding to pay for teacher stipends, field trips, and classroom supplies. Each summer we needed stipends for four teachers (K-1, 2-3, 4-5 and 6-12) to work with the 40-50 students we served each summer. Fortunately, our first year was supported primarily through a grant from Georgia Southern's Partnership Council and ESOL Program Funds. As our initial brainstorming session occurred late in the academic year, most of Effingham county's funds had already been allocated. This, however, did not preclude any support from the school system. In fact, Director of ESOL Services, Kristie Long, was instrumental in finding a location for camp, enlisting and securing on site support from the IT department, collecting and organizing registration and other paperwork, and soliciting support from county level administration.

Each year since, our collaboration has continued with both entities contributing resources and brainstorming cost effective possibilities. For example, the second year Effingham County paid for the majority of teacher stipends and fiscal support from Georgia Southern included supplying non-fiction and fiction books for instructional use during camp that students were able to take home, a single teacher stipend, and a small amount for classroom supplies. Knowing that we would need a lot of material for our bridge building projects and challenge, teachers sent flyers home with students requesting that parents donate supplies such as paper towel tubes, boxes, string and other inexpensive or recycled items. We also took our field trip to Georgia Southern and students were able to see the bridge that engineering students entered in a national contest and interacted with undergraduate and graduate students as they worked on



projects in the mechanical engineering lab. An added benefit of this experience was that several of the college students and faculty members have English as their second or third language. What started out as a cost-effective field trip, turned out to be an engaging and enlightening experience for both parents and students. These examples demonstrate that through creativity and collaborative efforts, we have been able to find ways to offer our summer Language Experience Camp for English learners and their families at no cost to them.

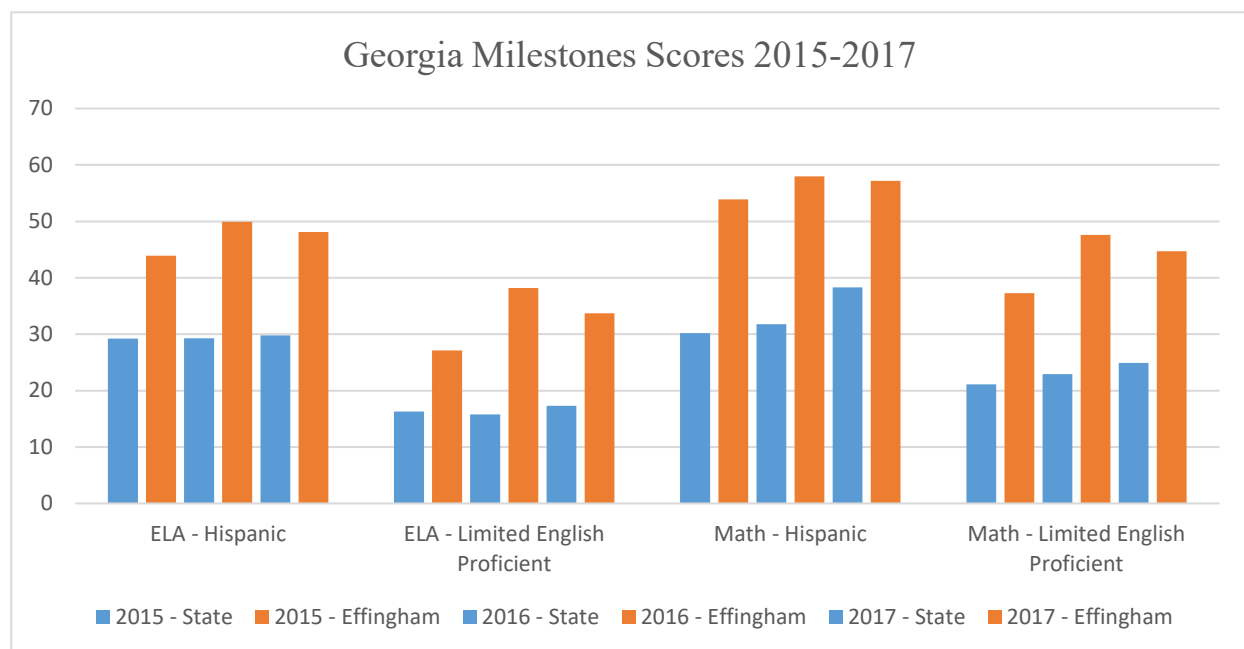
### **An Unanticipated Benefit: Professional Learning for ESOL Teachers and Georgia Southern's Teacher Candidates**

One unanticipated positive outcome of our Language Experience Camp was the opportunity for professional learning for ESOL teachers and undergraduates about to be enrolled in Georgia Southern's ESOL Methods course. While developing curriculum and materials, ESOL teachers worked together collaboratively to integrate best practices for working with English learners (Cloud, Genesse & Hamayan, 2009; De Jong & Harper, 2005) and to share ideas and resources. Teachers discussed ways to utilize the same or similar structures across grade levels to provide consistency. These conversations contributed to the professional development of ESOL teachers working at camp and undergraduate students at Georgia Southern were able to see these best practices in action. At the end of the spring semester students who registered for ESOL Methods for the upcoming fall semester were invited to volunteer for one or more days. Throughout their time at camp, undergraduate students rotated through each classroom with the intent of providing an additional set of hands during the many interactive activities and also to focus on how the skilled ESOL teachers they were supporting integrated

language development into content instruction. For example, students saw how thinking maps and sentence frames were used in Kindergarten and middle school to scaffold content concepts and language production. Further, the thematic nature of camp allowed undergraduates to see how related content was taught with increasing levels of difficulty. The camp setting provided an opportunity for undergraduate students to work with English learners across the K-12 grade span who spoke a variety of languages at home and who had diverse degrees of English proficiency. Students who volunteered at camp regularly referred to their experiences throughout the ESOL Methods course in the fall.

## Final Thoughts

The Language Experience Camp for English learners and their families has become a tradition in Effingham County. Students and their families begin asking about camp in March because they know spaces fill up fast. It has become a place where



*Figure 1 Test scores from 2015 - 2017 for Effingham County and Georgia*

students and families connect with several ESOL teachers and the ESOL director as well as students from across the county. It is an example of how one county has adjusted to their changing student demographic in a way that supports students academically and also helps them integrate socially. As Figure 1 indicates, Effingham county is doing well in their efforts to educate their English learners, most of whom are Hispanic. The Language Experience Camp is not the sole reason for the academic success of these students, but it has become an integral part of a comprehensive system to educate all students in the county.

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