

# Supporting English Language Learners

English language learners are a richly heterogeneous group. The paths they take to acquire a new language and to adjust to their new environment are also varied and in keeping with their unique needs and experiences. There are over 5 million English language learners in public schools today, making up 12 percent of the total school population.

One of the most significant challenges we face in public education is how best to prepare all our students for a rapidly changing, technology driven, global world. To do so, we need to broaden our view of student achievement to include a greater emphasis on the higher order skills necessary for developing global citizens who are ready for the world beyond school. The Common Core State Standards focus on ensuring students are ready to meet the challenges of life beyond school and addresses the need for increased rigor by significantly raising the expectations for students. These raised expectations come at a time when the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity within our student population is rapidly growing, with 14 million new immigrants arriving in the United States during the last ten years. English language learners are the fastest growing group of students with an increase of over 70% since the early 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the growing controversy around the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, even the harshest critics would agree that we want to make sure our schools

graduate students who:

*"... develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language."*

*Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts*

As the number of bilingual learners in schools increases, it becomes even more important for teachers to use effective practices that ensure English language learners acquire the academic English and the content-area knowledge they need for school success. For English language learners to have the same learning outcomes as other learners in their peer group, we will need to provide multiple pathways to these common outcomes. The challenge for teachers is providing appropriate cognitive rigor as well as teaching the English language skills necessary to access all of the discipline areas.

English language learners are a diverse and complex group of students with a wide range of educational needs, backgrounds and languages. One thing is certain - there is no one approach or

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**We know that an explicit focus on literacy and language is an integral part of effective teaching for ELLs.**

**We know that the strategic use of the student's first language is important.**

**We know that acquiring academic language and vocabulary is one of the most effective predictors of success for all students<sup>1</sup>.**

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## What is effective best practice for teaching English language learners is effective teaching for all students. English language and literacy need to be taught in a culturally responsive way. Research findings from second language acquisition research should guide teachers as they plan a sequence of learning, select and design tasks, and set learning intentions for English Language Learners.

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response that will adequately meet all their educational goals and needs. This group of students offer their teachers both challenges and opportunities. This is particularly the case in middle and high schools. Understanding the diverse backgrounds immigrant children bring to their schooling is the first step to providing these students with a quality education<sup>ii</sup>.

### Effective teachers know their students and their linguistic backgrounds

Effective teachers know the understandings and skills their students bring to their learning and what they need in order to ensure that they are on track to leave school ready for college and careers. Immigrant students and the children of immigrants in the United States come from many cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Given the wide range of English language learners and their backgrounds, it is important that all teachers take the time to learn about their students, particularly in terms of their language and literacy histories. Students learning English will differ in many ways, including their level of oral proficiency in English, literacy ability in both their first language and English, and cultural backgrounds. Some English language learners will be new immigrants and will need to develop both conversational and academic English, while others may have been born in the United States and have

already developed conversational language abilities in English but lack academic language proficiency. Their educational experiences before arriving in the United States will also vary. Effective teachers therefore need to understand the students' literacy levels in their first language. Some learners will have grade-level skills, while others have limited or no literacy because of the quality, or lack, of previous schooling<sup>iii</sup>.

The background knowledge English learners bring to school greatly affects their performance. For this reason, teachers of English language learners need to understand their students' past experiences to build the appropriate background for the new learning. Teachers need to understand the diversity within the group of English language learners and how they differ from other students in the class.

Research has shown that English language learners are more likely to do well in classes where the teachers know their students well, are aware of their learning needs, and take an interest in their lives<sup>iv</sup>. Knowing students as learners encompasses understanding the pathways of progress for each student and the patterns of progress for students. These understandings allow teachers to fine-tune their teaching and make the pedagogical moves needed to ensure all students are engaged in the learning. Therefore,

effective teachers of English language learner students need an extensive and continually developing knowledge of:

- Their students' individual learning profiles in general, and English language learning profiles specifically, and the implications these have for teaching
- The patterns of progress for students as they become literate
- The students' prior knowledge
- Their students' literacy practices outside school, as well as in school

### Effective teaching is rigorous, grade-level appropriate, and provides deliberate and appropriate scaffolds

Teachers' positive expectations for, and acknowledgment of, students' efforts are key factors leading to success in learning. Because teachers' expectations influence all aspects of their teaching, they impact learners' patterns of progress, as well as on their achievement. Research shows that students know that they are treated differently and that teachers have higher expectations for some than others<sup>v</sup>! This applies to students who are learning English at the same time that they are engaged in increasingly complex curriculum. It is important not to "dumb down" the academic challenge for English language learners. Instead, effective teachers support students so that they can access and

engage with high-level subject matter content<sup>vi</sup>.

High expectations for English language learners on their own will not be sufficient; these expectations need to be accompanied by high levels of support.

Students who are learning English should have activities that are rigorous, but flexible enough to allow multiple entry points. The goal of providing scaffolding is for the support to be flexible with the purpose of moving students towards independence. All students, regardless of where they start, will benefit from participation.

Effective teachers use flexible instructional practices that include reducing barriers to learning, providing appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, while maintaining high achievement expectations for all students, including students who are learning English<sup>vii</sup>. Effective teachers of students learning English therefore:

- Ensure that students are asked to engage in increasingly complex tasks
- Scaffold students' ability to participate in the activities

**Learning outcomes should address the language demands of the teaching and learning, as well as the content**

Becoming an expert in the language of the classroom is a challenge for all students and particularly for students who are also learning English. It includes learning about the language used as the medium of instruction, because much of what is taught is conveyed verbally, through questioning, directing, prompting, commenting, and evaluating.

Students learning English must learn to use a broad repertoire of strategies to construct meaning from academic talk and complex texts, to participate in academic discussions, and to write across a variety of disciplines. To provide support for English language learners, teachers need to maintain focus on the curriculum goals, as well as the language demands of the learning. The more meaningful the context for the learner the easier this will be to achieve.

Research has shown that students can learn English and subject matter content at the same time. It is not necessary to wait until they reach high levels of English proficiency before introducing academic content; students can learn both simultaneously. This is particularly important for middle and high school students where it is crucial that there is a dual focus on both academic content-area knowledge and academic English.

English language learners need teachers who understand how the English language works and the challenges it poses for students for whom English is not their first language. Effective teachers are aware of the complexity of a wide range of texts and the potential linguistic challenges these pose for students. They also recognize sequences of events occurring in the classroom and how these impact student learning.

Effective teachers provide English language learners with multiple opportunities for authentic language use with a focus on using academic language. They ask:

- Is the language focus on key language?
- Do I make sure the students have many opportunities to notice and use new language?

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**“Simply put: Do not dumb down the academic challenge for English language learners. Instead, support them so that they can access and engage with high-level subject matter content.”**

Aida Walqui  
Language Magazine, February 2010, p 25

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**“ELLs are a heterogeneous group with differences in ethnic background, first language, socioeconomic status, quality of prior schooling, and levels of English language. (Programs)... should therefore respect and build on the language and culture of ELLs by leveraging the primary language linguistic and cultural resources they bring to the classroom.”**

Council of Chief State School Officers  
2012

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### **Instruction should focus on the creation of meaning about the content by students in an interactive and collaborative learning environment**

An important variable in second language learning is the quality of classroom interactions. English language learners will not learn English in a quiet classroom; rather it is the result of meaningful interaction with others in the target language and teachers need to move towards more richly interrelated language use with their students. Learning in general, and becoming literate specifically, is a social process where students actively engage in the learning through co-construction of knowledge. These interactions will be between the teacher and learner, as well as with other students. An effective teacher plans for, and monitors interactions that take place among students. All students, and English learners in particular, need opportunities to construct new knowledge through opportunities for meaningful collaboration around purposeful tasks to deepen understanding.

The Common Core State Standards have set higher expectations for all students. The instructional shifts needed for students to meet these more rigorous standards require that teachers provide students with opportunities to describe their reasoning, share explanations, make predictions, justify conclusions, argue from evidence, and negotiate meaning from increasingly complex texts. Providing meaningful opportunities to collaborate and engage in quality classroom conversations will be important for all students in meeting these standards. Students with developing levels of English proficiency will require instruction that carefully supports their understanding and

use of emerging language as they participate in these activities. Language learning is a recursive process, which means that in order to become proficient users of a new language, learners need repeated opportunities to be exposed to language features and to practice identifying and using them in a variety of increasingly complex texts and tasks.

Teachers need to ask:

- Do I see my students as active listeners and provide numerous opportunities to collaborate around context-embedded tasks which make the abstract concrete?

### **Optimum learning environments celebrate the culture and linguistic diversity of the students**

High expectations for English language learners are insufficient on their own. Rather they go hand in hand with creating an optimal learning environment that generates an atmosphere of trust. The social setting teachers provide is equally as important as the physical environment. Research tells us that the quality of the instruction makes a difference and more than that, that it is the interaction between the teacher and student, most especially the feedback the student gets, which is essential (Hattie, 2003). Effective teachers cultivate a classroom culture where students feel safe and supported to explore new ideas and take risks.

Learning to speak an additional language involves taking risks and this is more likely to happen in a classroom where students feel that their attempts will be valued and where the teacher respects the cultural diversity of the students and creates opportunities to bridge cross-cultural communication gaps. Teachers need to help students

to see that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. By accepting their approximations and providing informed, genuine and encouraging responses, teachers are letting students know that you believe they will learn. While teachers can create the conditions that foster learning and demonstrate strategies for learning to occur, the students have to actively engage in the process. The program needs to be interesting enough to make students want to engage in the learning. The classroom that integrates language and content and infuse socio-cultural awareness is an excellent place to scaffold instruction for students learning English.

### **Meaningful instruction builds English language learners' home language, cultural assets, and prior knowledge**

All learning builds on prior learning and teachers need to help English language learners make connections between what they already know and new learning. By acknowledging prior experiences and learning, English language learners see their first languages and cultures as resources that contribute to education, rather than something to be overcome or cast aside. Bilingualism and biliteracy are assets, and effective teaching positions first languages and home environments as resources by using them in bridging prior knowledge to new knowledge.

Because becoming literate is a process where students' prior knowledge interacts with print to construct meaning, it is important teachers understand as much as possible about the students' world. The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows.

Students learning English bring

to our schools a wide variety of understandings and a range of educational experiences. Within the safe and welcoming classroom environment, teachers are given a unique opportunity to tap the rich resource of knowledge and understandings that English language learners bring to school, and which, in turn, enrich the learning of all students in the classroom.

**Effective teachers recognize assessment as central to their classroom practice and gather data from a range of sources**

Through assessment, teachers gather information about their students' prior knowledge, language needs, and learning progress.

The educational strengths and needs of English language learners can be identified most effectively through multiple forms of assessment and should gather information on students' content knowledge and academic language competence. Because language learning is developmental and involves experiment and approximation, the strengths and learning needs of English language learners can be identified most effectively through the use of a variety of assessment tools. Teachers therefore should provide students with a wide range of opportunities to demonstrate what they know and what they can do.

Effective assessment practices for all students allow teachers to monitor students' learning so that they may adjust instruction accordingly, providing students with timely and useful feedback, and encourage students to reflect on their own thinking and learning.

It is important to engage students in the development of their own expertise

through metacognitive activities. The goal is to have English language learners understand how to learn, how to monitor their progress, and how to self correct.

Assessment of English language learners should:

- Focus on improving student learning
- Make criteria for quality work clear
- Be linked directly to curriculum expectations
- Recognize linguistic and academic progress, while taking into account realistic and varying rates of second-language learning
- Be gathered from a variety of sources

Teachers of English language learners need to ask:

- Are my assessments based on clear statements of expectations?
- Do my assessments take into account the student's developing understanding of English?
- Do my assessments take into account the cultural and linguistic background of the student?
- Do my assessments allow for the use of the student's first language as appropriate?
- Do I see students' errors and misconceptions as a window into the learning process?

**Students learning English as an additional language need effective teaching**

The English language learner student population represents a rapidly growing and highly diverse group of students and there is no silver bullet or single program that will meet all their needs. Too often in the past the needs of English language learners have been

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**We do not first “learn” language and then later “use” it. Second-language learners do not in any case have the time to study English as a “subject” before they use it to learn other things; they must begin to use it as a medium for learning as soon as they enter school, simultaneously developing their second language hand-in-hand with curriculum knowledge.**

Pauline Gibbons (2002), p. 25

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**“There is no way to know whether ELLs tested in English score low because of lagging content knowledge and skills, or because of limited English proficiency, or because of other factors that interfere with their test performance – or some combination.”**

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Goldenberg, C. (2008)

met with lowered expectations and a simplified curriculum. The end result is that despite an initial advantage, length of time spent by English language learner students in US public schools appears to be associated with declining academic achievement and aspirations<sup>viii</sup>. There are, however, islands of excellence where students are meeting the high expectations of their teachers. Our challenge is to take the practices of these classrooms to scale.

Students who are learning English need highly effective teachers. Effective teachers see themselves as life-long learners and understand that they need to update their skills and knowledge continuously, not only in response to a changing world but also in response to new research and emerging knowledge about learning and teaching in general and English language learners in particular.

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