

BEST INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Selected Research 2006-2011

ENGLISH LEARNERS

English Learners (ELs) in the United States are the fastest growing subgroup among school-aged students. Over the last two decades, the number of ELs in the US has grown 169 percent. New Hampshire has seen even greater growth in the same time period. 2011 NHDOE data show that more than 4700 students in NH public schools are identified as English Learners. The number of ELs enrolled in NH school districts ranges from one student in some rural communities to more than 2000 in larger cities.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

English Learners in New Hampshire are a diverse group of students. Many came to the US as immigrants and refugees, some were adopted from by American families, and many others were born in NH. Collectively, they speak more than 130 languages, the most common being Spanish (about 40% of ELs). In addition, more than 100 students speak each of the following languages: Nepali, Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Russian, Bosnian, Maay, Portuguese, and Indonesian.

When planning instruction, it is important for teachers to consider each child individually and to work closely with families to identify relevant cultural influences. (Brown and Doolittle, 2008) While students have unique and valuable experiences to share, their life experiences and prior education may not align with those reflected in American texts and lessons. Coeducational classrooms, cooperative learning activities, writing implements, and homework assignments are just a few aspects of school in New Hampshire that may be new or confusing for ELs and their parents. To prepare a foundation for ELs' success in literacy, it is essential for teachers, building administrators, and school staff to:

- Establish a welcoming school climate
- Develop cultural competency
- Select materials in which ELs can recognize themselves and familiar settings
- Implement a culturally-responsive curriculum

To learn more, view *Connecting Diverse Cultures* from www.cal.org and the online resources from the Cultural Orientation Resource Center at www.culturalorientation.net.

English Language Development and Academic Standards

ELs in New Hampshire receive instruction in English language acquisition through a few different program models. The most common program models in school districts across the state are pull-out services for small groups and instruction that is directly provided to ELs in the mainstream classroom. A few districts also have self-contained EL classrooms which primarily serve newcomers.

ESOL teachers differentiate instruction according to each student's level of language development. The six levels of language development (Entering, Beginning, Developing, Expanding, Bridging, and Reaching) form the basis for the model performance indicators in the English language development standards created by the WIDA Consortium. New Hampshire, along with 26 other states, is a member of the WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) Consortium. In fall of 2012, the Consortium will publish a new, expanded edition of their English Language Development (ELD) standards that is aligned with the Common Core State Standards. This document will help ESOL and content teachers contextualize the standards in lessons and activities. For more information on the ELD standards, professional development, and research being conducted by WIDA, visit www.wida.us.

BEST INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

Key Components of Reading

Effective, evidence-based instruction, which focuses on framing the learning, establishing clear expectations, and setting the criteria for success, will be useful in teaching English Learners. In *Developing Literacy in Second-language Learners*, August and Shanahan (2006) report that instruction in the key components of reading has clear benefits for language-minority students. These are the same components as identified by the National Reading Panel (2000), and they include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. However, it must be noted that adjustments to these approaches are needed to have maximum benefit for English Learners.

Instruction in the key components of reading is necessary—but not sufficient—for teaching language-minority students to read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical as well—but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked in instruction. (August and Shanahan, 2006)

Numerous research studies and articles by experts in the field suggest helpful guidelines and instructional strategies for English Learners in the major components of reading.

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

An important finding in reading research is that word-level skills, such as decoding and spelling, are often taught well enough to allow English Learners to perform as well as native English speakers. (August and Shanahan, 2006) English Learners who are literate in their first language (L1) can often transfer decoding skills if the phonemic structure is similar to English. (Genesee and Geva, 2006) For young students and older ELs with no formal education, it is essential to teach phonemic awareness and phonics contextually so that meaning can be connected to these discrete skills. (Calderon, 2009) Special attention needs to be given to phonemes which do not exist in the student's home language, as well as graphemes which look the same in the student's L1 and English, but represent different phonemes (e.g., the Russian letter p is pronounced as /r/).

Vocabulary

English Learners quickly learn common words and phrases through social interactions with peers and basic classroom routines, but explicit and intensive vocabulary instruction is needed for students to understand idiomatic expressions, multi-step directions, and academic language used in the classroom as well as in texts. (Gersten, 2007). Vocabulary should not be thought of as a list of isolated terms, but rather as the use of those terms in the context of sentences and paragraphs. (Fisher and Frey, 2011).

Repeated exposure to new words is key to ELs' vocabulary development. In addition to modeling correct pronunciation and asking students to say words aloud several times, it's important to connect verbal, written and pictorial representations to new vocabulary. Add new vocabulary to word walls, give simple definitions or demonstrations, use realia and picture dictionaries, and encourage students to keep personal word study notebooks.

Based on informal conversations with English Learners, school personnel may think that language-minority students are fluent in English. However, teachers need to keep in mind that ELs' conversational skills rarely match their understanding or use of academic vocabulary and do not indicate that they have the necessary language skills to work successfully in the classroom.

Rivera et al (2009) define academic language as "the language of school, used in textbooks, classrooms, and on tests in different content areas". According to Kinsella (2005), the most difficult part of vocabulary instruction for the teacher is not the process for teaching a new word; it is learning to analyze the lesson and extract the key words that need to be taught. For example, students will encounter critical academic words, such as *consequence*, *analyze*, *issue*, and *predict* in all academic content areas, but teachers may be unaware of an EL's unfamiliarity with these words.

For many English Learners, the meanings behind academic vocabulary can take longer to understand than common nouns and adjectives. Fisher and Frey (2011) caution that simply listening to teachers use academic English does not ensure that students will become proficient users of the language. Students need many opportunities to use the language of the lesson in guided small group work and structured whole-class work and discussions. Teachers can scaffold comprehension, knowledge, and use of academic vocabulary through the following strategies:

- Model the use of new terms verbally
- Point out polysemous words, such as *table* and *plane*, which have specialized meanings in academic content areas
- Use visuals and graphic organizers systematically to explain abstract concepts
- Use T-charts and Venn diagrams to show relationships among concepts
- Point out cognates
- Explain and use dictionary definitions and word roots

(Cloud, 2009; Echevarria, 2009; Fisher et al, 2008)

Fluency

Reading fluency develops with growth in vocabulary, increased exposure to print, and reading aloud from a variety of texts. (Francis et al, 2006) However, ELs typically have fewer opportunities to read aloud in English and receive feedback than their English-proficient peers. In the early and intermediate stages of English language development, ELs also may read more slowly and with less understanding than other students in their class. (Klingner, 2008) Modeling is important for fluency development; teachers need to read aloud frequently—even for older ELs—so students can learn appropriate phrasing, intonation, and pronunciation of new vocabulary in context. Calderon (2009) strongly recommends providing instructional-level reading materials for students to read aloud; in other words, teachers need to provide stories and texts where students are familiar with the meaning of at least 90 percent of the words. For fluency practice, English Learners will gain confidence and improve accuracy through choral reading, reading aloud with an EL peer or a small group, and repeated readings of the same text.

Comprehension

Many ELs can keep pace with their English-proficient peers when the focus is on word-level skills, but they lag behind when the instructional focus shifts to text-level skills such as reading comprehension. (August and Shanahan, 2006) Crosson and Lesaux (2010) found that ELs' overall reading comprehension is influenced strongly by fluent reading of text as well as oral language proficiency, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. As with reading fluency, reading comprehension depends on knowing between 90 and 95 percent of the words in a text, so students with lower levels of proficiency in English are likely to need substantial language support in addition to strong reading instruction to achieve expected goals. (Calderon, 2009)

Regardless of the content area, English Learners need explicit instruction in comprehension strategies throughout the course of a lesson, especially as sentence structures and concepts become more complex. The following are strategies that teachers may find useful:

Before reading:

- Pre-teach new vocabulary and how it is used in the context of the lesson
- For younger children, point out pictorial clues in stories

During reading:

- Use think-out-loud protocols so ELs can better understand cause and effect or a sequence of events
- Organize structured conversations in small groups
- Pair ELs with a more-proficient EL or native English-proficient peer
- Direct older students' attention to features of the text such as headings, charts, bold-faced words, and sidebars
- Scaffold comprehension through concept maps, video clips, and games

After reading:

- Model how to give a verbal summary
- Encourage students to ask questions to clarify meaning

- Allow ELs to compare their understanding of a text with an English-proficient peer
- For ELs with limited oral proficiency, offer nonverbal ways to show understanding such as pointing to photos or illustrations, giving a thumbs up or down in response to a question, drawing a picture or diagram, giving a short demonstration

Early Literacy Skills

Teachers may need to focus special attention on a few components of early literacy development to help English Learners succeed in reading and writing.

Oral Language

It is not enough to teach English Learners reading skills alone; extensive oral language development must be incorporated into literacy instruction for ELs to be successful. (August, 2006) According to New Hampshire ACCESS for ELLs[®] test data, most ELs become fluent speakers of English before attaining proficiency in the domains of listening comprehension, reading or writing. August and Shanahan (2006) report that well-developed oral proficiency leads to good reading comprehension and writing skills for these students.

To encourage students to use English and participate in verbal activities, Cloud (2011) suggests:

- Use of echo talk for language practice
- Use of partner talks through cooperative tasks
- Design verbal prompts or sentence frames to accommodate each level of English development
- Ask students to restate or add an idea to other students' comments

In addition, NH teachers report that ELs are enthusiastic and engaged when there is use of:

- Numerous software programs and iPad apps that are geared to different levels of language development and offer valuable practice in speaking
- Replaying video clips of ELs while they speak or give a presentation in order for students to receive visual and verbal feedback

Alphabetic Principle and Concepts of Print

The written form of ELs' home languages may be based on an alphabet, but many alphabets are quite different in script as well as number and type of graphemes (e.g., Greek, Arabic and Russian). Other languages are based on characters (Chinese) or a syllabary (Amharic). In addition, the orientation of some [printed] languages is right-to-left rather than left-to-right; a few languages also are read vertically, as opposed to horizontally, from top to bottom. English Learners who are literate in such languages will need extra time and practice with diverse printed materials and electronic resources to recognize and understand these differences.

Writing Instruction

As with all students, English Learners can flourish in a supportive environment when given opportunities to write about and illustrate things of importance to them. Writing is typically the last domain of communication in which ELs attain proficiency, but with appropriate scaffolding, instruction, and time to practice skills, English Learners at all levels of language development can learn to write in English.

Teachers need to be aware of the influence that an EL's home language and culture may have on the student's writing. For students who are literate in their first language (L1) as well as those who have had no formal education, the home language will affect the EL's understanding and correct use of English syntax and vocabulary. English text structures may be unknown to literate ELs; English text structures are linear and must be explicitly taught and practiced in the context of the content area. (Fisher and Frey, 2007) Additionally, discourse patterns in the home culture may differ from the sequential pattern that is commonly emphasized in an American classroom. (Fisher and Frey, 2007) For example, some ELs may tell a story in a circuitous fashion or begin a paragraph with many details rather than a topic sentence. Finally, for a small number of older ELs, even using a writing implement (e.g., pencil) may be a new experience.

Many strategies for teaching writing to young English-proficient students are also effective for English Learners in primary grades and older students with no formal education. Although all students will pass through the same basic stages in their development of writing, the rate at which students progress is dependent upon the student's age, educational background, and level of proficiency in English. Besides creating a print-rich environment with a wide variety of story books, poetry, and informational texts, it is important for teachers to plan pre-writing activities, to have conversations about the theme and students' background knowledge, to create opportunities for students to draw, and to brainstorm descriptive words. Story boards, prompts, and sentence frames are helpful for teaching sequencing of events. A recent study reported positive gains for English Learners in one NH school where students discussed their personal immigration experiences and illustrated key events before teachers engaged in vocabulary development and scaffolding techniques to help students write their three- or five-page stories. (Frankel, 2011)

Fisher et al (2008) recommend that teachers view writing as a means to facilitate, rather than demonstrate, learning. As English Learners make gains in oral proficiency and reading, they will continue to need explicit instruction in writing conventions and word choice, as well as expository text structures, (e.g., making comparisons, cause and effect, problem and solution, persuasion) and sentence fluency. (Kinsella, 2005) Teachers can help ELs strengthen their writing skills through the following strategies:

- Provide think-write-pair-share activities
- Allow joint authorship or team writing
- Demonstrate writing to explain thinking
- Provide guided note-taking
- Implement interactive journals in which teachers respond to students' entries

- Continue the use of language frames to assist students with higher-order writing skills that are important in all content areas

Effective Planning and Formative Assessment

A very important element to consider when planning instruction for English Learners is the need to develop a *language objective*, in addition to a content objective, for each lesson. Mainstream and content area teachers will find it helpful to collaborate with the ESOL teacher to determine language objectives which match ELs' respective levels of proficiency in English. The *Can-Do Descriptors*, a companion publication to the *WIDA English Language Development Standards*, is concise and simple to use for this purpose. (Sherris, 2008)

ELs can focus more easily on the content of a lesson and make sense of classroom activities when the following strategies are used regularly:

- Predictable classroom routines (e.g. starting class, collecting homework, etc.)
- Consistent formats for assignments, work sheets, and quizzes
- Increased "wait time" for oral responses
- Use of manuscript (print), rather than cursive, when writing key vocabulary or instructions on the board
- Step-by-step oral and written directions before students do independent, pair or group work
(Cloud, 2011)

Teachers can gain an in-depth picture of individual and interactive student learning by using performance-based tasks, in addition to more conventional *formative assessment* tools. (Sherris, 2008) For example, comprehension and mastery of concepts may be documented through an EL student portfolio (either electronic or paper-based) which contains photos of projects, video clips of demonstrations or small group activities, writing samples, diagrams or drawings.

RTI for English Learners

When an English Learner is having difficulty mastering specific skills, it is important for the teacher to accommodate the instructional strategies and/or the instructional pace of the class. Struggling ELs may also benefit from *Response to Intervention* (RTI). Gersten et al (2007) recommend using the RTI components of screening, evidence-based intervention, and progress monitoring with English Learners. The more teachers know about language development and students' home languages and cultures, the better informed teachers will be when making decisions about interpreting screening and assessment results and designing appropriate interventions. Esparza-Brown and Sanford (2011) note that "the combination of variable English proficiency and experience with the culture and classroom setting may strongly influence performance".

Before ELs are recommended for Tier 2 or Tier 3 services, teachers need to ensure that students have had sufficient exposure to high-quality instruction in an environment that is supportive of their language development and sensitive to their specific needs. (Echevarria and Short, 2009) Specific features of such

instruction include: a language objective (in addition to a content objective) for each lesson; ongoing instruction in English language development skills with a qualified ESOL teacher; explicit teaching of academic language contained in the lesson; activation of background knowledge; oral interaction; and review of concepts and vocabulary taught in earlier lessons. Students also benefit from the use of materials and activities that relate to students' experiences and cultural practices. When doing screening and progress monitoring, make sure that ELs understand what specific tasks entail. (Klingner et al, 2008)

The focus on explicit instruction, appropriate scaffolding of reading skills, and frequent progress monitoring is essential in supporting ELs who struggle with reading. However, it's important to keep in mind that not all ELs are at risk for reading difficulties. August and Shanahan (2006) report that "reading difficulties among language-minority students may be more a function of individual differences than of language-minority status. Similar proportions of language-minority students and monolingual English speakers are classified as poor readers." Teachers need to evaluate EL students' growth as compared to that of true peers—those with a similar level of language proficiency, acculturation, and educational background—to gain a balanced picture of their progress.

Professional Development

Ongoing support for teachers who serve English Learners is as significant a priority as designing effective instructional approaches. Calderon (2009) states, "There is a direct correlation between the quality and intensity of a professional development program and student outcomes." In addition to studying second language acquisition theory, mainstream teachers have found professional development to be most helpful when it includes opportunities for hands-on practice with effective techniques in their own classrooms, and sustained mentoring or personalized coaching from a highly-experienced EL professional. (August 2008, 2006)

Numerous face-to-face and online courses that focus on instruction for ELs are offered by universities in New Hampshire and through OPEN-NH. Helpful print resources, podcasts, and archived webinars can be found on the following websites:

www.cal.org

www.schoolsmovingup.net

www.wida.us

www.ncela.gwu.edu

www.centeroninstruction.org

www.colorincolorado.org

(Scroll down for Bibliography)

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