



# HELPING URBAN DISTRICTS PROVIDE QUALITY INSTRUCTION TO ENGLISH LEARNERS

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In 1968, Congress passed legislation that opened up what had been a highly restrictive immigration policy. Shortly thereafter, the largest wave of immigration in American history began. It is now in its fourth decade and has changed the nature of this country's education system.

Virtually every school district in the country faces the challenge of designing sound instructional programs for English learners. Challenges are particularly great, however, in large, urban school districts. In fact, in some urban districts and in schools with 750 or more students, English learners make up a large proportion of the population, sometimes as high as 25-65% of all students. The early elementary grades tend to have higher proportions of English learners than secondary schools.<sup>1</sup>

This paper outlines several key challenges – and recommendations to help address those challenges – that urban school districts face in educating students who are English learners. These challenges include:

1. Lack of scientific research
2. Improving the quality of instruction of English learners
3. Providing valid and reliable assessments to measure the achievement of English learners
4. Providing screening to identify students in need of early reading intervention.

## The Scope of the English Learner Challenge

English learners or English language learners (EL learner) come from families where a language other than English is spoken with some frequency and whose English language proficiency is limited. In earlier eras, these students were referred to as Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English as a Second Language (ESL) students, but EL learner (often ELL) seems to be a more accurate, less judgmental description of the populations.

*"Students in our district come from many different countries; at last count, there were 98 different languages spoken by students. With so many students who are learning English as a second language, we have had extensive programs to help those students. Now funding for these programs has been capped at five years, when the research tells us that it generally takes seven years to ensure that academic ability matches speaking ability."*

**— Patricia Harvey, superintendent, St. Paul, Minnesota Public Schools**

Following are some key statistics that help paint a picture for policymakers of the scope of the challenge facing our education system regarding EL learners:

- EL learners are educated in every state and the District of Columbia.
- A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education<sup>2</sup> last year noted that, during the 2000-01 school year, EL learners accounted for 10.5% of students in elementary schools and 5.6% of secondary students. The survey also found that 42 states reported an increase in the number of EL learners in schools over the previous 12 months; 25 reported increases between 5% and 20%; Georgia reported a 113% increase.
- English learners in this country speak more than 460 different languages. Spanish speakers continue to represent the largest group of English learners (79.2%).
- After Spanish, the next largest language groups are students who speak Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese and Korean. Combined, they now account for approximately 6% of English learners in schools. Other languages are spoken by less than 1% of the national population, though there are urban areas with sizable populations of Somali students, Russian students and students speaking Tagalog.

## What Role Do Federal Policies Play?

The federal position on the education of EL learners is largely determined by federal case law (*Lau v. Nichols*; *Castaneda v. Pickard*). These decisions provide challenging guidelines for school districts in the provision of services for English learners.

In *Lau v. Nichols*, the court indicated that it is not acceptable to provide EL learners with instruction in English that is not modified or adjusted to make instruction comprehensible. *Castaneda* specified that districts must provide students with access to the general curriculum at their grade level. The court intentionally did not advocate any one approach (e.g., native language instruction, immersion, immersion with native language support, dual immersion). Rather, it asked only that the approach be based on sound theory and that districts evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional approaches. Evaluating effectiveness has been a major challenge for urban districts, especially given the complexities of assessing academic progress for English learners.

Both *Lau* and *Castaneda* indicate districts must provide instruction that supports student acquisition of the English language (both oral and written). Provision of such programs has proven to be a major challenge to urban districts for numerous reasons. The first is that many of the training programs for teachers of EL learners, until recently, stressed native language instruction and paid scant attention to the English language development component of the job. In addition, coursework tended to be more theoretical than applied and practical.

Furthermore, for years teachers in many regions were encouraged to use a loosely structured "natural language" approach, which relied heavily on improvisation and allowed language to develop based on a child's interests and needs to communicate. As a result, there was a paucity of quality curriculum materials developed. This situation is now gradually improving.

Recent federal policy (during both the Bush and Clinton administrations) has stressed the importance of reaching competence in English within three years, regardless of the approach used. Given some of the above problems, this remains a very ambitious goal for many urban districts.

## Key Challenges to Educating English Language Learners

### **Lack of scientific research**

Given the paucity of research on effective English language development approaches, deciding on the best ways to teach EL learners is consistently cited as one of the biggest challenges urban districts face. The highly political and emotional tenor of the debate intensifies problems confronting districts. While scientific research provides little guidance on how best to deliver instruction to EL learners, there are a small number of research-based findings that are relevant:

- **A host of studies in the United States, Canada and Holland<sup>3-6</sup> shows that phonemic awareness does transfer across languages.** In other words, students who know that words are composed of individual sounds in Spanish will have this same awareness in English. Similarly, if students learn phonemic awareness in English, that knowledge will transfer to Spanish.
- **Students will retain their sense that letters or clusters of letters represent sounds.** They will, however, need to learn the new rules for any new language. Moving from a language with virtually no exceptions to rules to a language such as English with multiple exceptions is likely to be particularly difficult.
- **Vocabulary needs to be a key component of the curriculum.** Approaches that have been used successfully for teaching native English speakers appear to have great potential for use with EL learners. In some ways, vocabulary should be an anchor for the curriculum adaptations for English learners. (For more information regarding effective vocabulary instruction in English, see the report of the National Reading Panel, 2000).<sup>7</sup> Having students work in pairs or small groups where one student is an EL learner and the other is a native English speaker shows great promise for accelerating English language development.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institutes of Child Health and Development have supported much more extensive scientific research on EL learners. Much of this research, however, is still in an early phase.

Currently, there is no scientifically based research which convincingly demonstrates that beginning intensive academic instruction for children in their native language is superior to intensive academic instruction in English. The consensus, voiced by the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. Department of Education, is that there is a need to investigate, using rigorous methodologies, issues of language instruction *only in the context of the nature and quality of instruction provided*. Researchers are beginning to adopt this approach. It represents a radical shift away from the highly emotional, politicized debates on the topic that have dominated the field for the past 35 years.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Encourage more research.** State policymakers need to encourage and invest in the development of research on the best ways to teach EL learners. Such research is critical to allow urban school districts to focus their limited resources on those approaches that have been scientifically proven to be effective.
2. **Call for research to focus on the nature and quality of instruction provided.** State policymakers should take advantage of the current consensus as voiced by the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. Department of Education. This consensus offers a tremendous opportunity to steer public debate away from emotional, politicized topics. Research should focus on ways to enhance or adjust scientifically based approaches so they are effective not only in helping EL learners learn content but also in contributing to English language development.

## ***Improving the quality of instructional programs***

Teachers face the daunting task of simultaneously building literacy, developing writing ability and enhancing English language growth. Teaching students for whom English is a second language requires helping them with the double demands of acquiring a new language, while simultaneously mastering academic content. Given the range of different languages students speak and the great variations in home literacy levels and quality of preschool experiences, one size, most assuredly, will not fit all.

For students taught to read in their native language, or who enter the United States literate in their native language, the issue of transfer is a troubling one. Research has consistently shown that the years of transition from native language instruction to primarily English language instruction is a time fraught with peril for most students.<sup>8-10</sup>

Complicating matters is the fact that many of these students are from families where the adults in the household have varying levels of English language proficiency and literacy. This can limit the opportunities that are available for practicing English or for providing assistance with homework activities.

A large amount of time is being spent in classrooms providing native language instruction. A major source of controversy in the field of bilingual education is when to move students from native language instruction into English language academic instruction. Some have argued that transition to English language academic instruction should be delayed until students have a good command of academic English, which certain experts have noted as being as long as 5-7 years. In contrast, some have argued that transition to English instruction be made as early as possible. The argument is that students can acquire English while learning academic content, if English is introduced systematically and gradually.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Call for state academic standards that include language goals in addition to content-area goals and professional development for teachers in practices that help students meet goals in both areas.** Do not assume that increased use of oral language in school automatically leads to an increase in academic learning and the development of higher-order thinking skills. Artful and skillful blending of genuine dialogue about literature or science with cognitive challenge is an admirable, but perhaps only occasionally realized goal. More easily achieved goals include providing some time each day when EL learners have opportunities to work on all aspects of English language development and providing academically challenging content instruction (be it in native language or English).
- 2. Encourage the use of practices that have proven to be effective in helping EL learners develop both language, and reading and language arts skills.** For example, linking English language development with reading and language arts activities is the most promising strategy for teaching English learners. Teachers can facilitate large gains not only in reading but also in English language acquisition by blending together reading, writing, oral expression and vocabulary development activities. Effective teachers intentionally vary the cognitive and language demands during reading and language arts activities in accordance with their students' specific needs and the instructional objective of the lesson. If the purpose of the lesson is language development, the language demand is high and the cognitive demand low. Conversely, if the goal is content acquisition, the language demand is low and the cognitive demand high.
- 3. Integrate professional development in effective instruction for EL learners with the actual reading curricula used.** Inservice professional development efforts must focus more on the actual ways and means of teaching students effectively. It is of utmost importance to train all teachers in the use of effective teaching practices in their classrooms. Professional development activities should center on providing teachers with pragmatic knowledge on:

*"We provide inclusion for all second language learners; we favor 'push in' services that get them in the regular classroom over 'pull out' services that take them from the classroom. We train regular classroom teachers to have strategies that once were used only by teachers specializing in English language learners or special education."*

**– Patricia Harvey,  
superintendent,  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
Public Schools**

- Effective practices for building vocabulary
- Effective use of sheltered instruction techniques in the context of the curricula being used
- Effective techniques for peer-assisted learning involving pairings of English learners with native English speakers
- In addition, more formal academies or professional development institutes need to be supplemented with mentoring, in-course coaching and teacher study groups.

**4. Avoid ideologies and focus on effective instruction when considering educational policies that impact English learners.** Until recently, the dominant theory in bilingual education has been that proficiency in a student’s native language is needed before full-time instruction in English can be provided. There is virtually no research to support this position, as reported by the National Academy of Sciences.<sup>11</sup> Successful instructional programs do appear to include the following characteristics:

- Some native language instruction
- For most students, a relatively early phasing in of English
- Teachers trained in instructing EL learners.

### **Providing valid and reliable assessments**

The role of assessment and accountability is to ensure school districts have an overall index of student achievement and growth in academic areas. Until recently, most states have continued to exempt EL learners from assessments on the basis of their length of time in the United States, enrollment in ESL or bilingual programs for three years or less, or level of language proficiency. Due to the accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, however, states are under increased pressure to identify ways of including EL learners in their academic assessment systems.

This is no easy task. Ensuring the assessments are valid and reliable for EL learners is challenging since few, if any, large-scale standardized assessments include such students in the norming sample. Therefore, results for EL learners may underestimate actual student content knowledge.

Currently, there are three alternative ways in which EL learners are assessed. These include:

1. Providing assessments in a student’s native language
2. Providing an alternative version of the English assessment in which the language complexity is reduced
3. Allowing accommodations for EL learners taking an English assessment developed for English monolingual students.

Native language assessments are designed to measure the same content as their English counterparts. Currently, eight states provide native language assessments to EL learners. While a few states have native language assessments for the most common language groups, they are not available for the majority of different languages. The widespread use of native language assessments is not practical because they are only appropriate for students who are literate and proficient in their native language and because the majority of EL learners are educated in English-only programs.

Simplifying test language is another alternative for assessing EL learners. To date, research in the use of linguistic simplification of assessments has been conducted with math and science tests. Although such research is very limited, there does appear to be some promise in using simplified language to make assessments more accessible for EL learners. When used correctly, linguistic simplification reduces language complexity without simplifying or changing the content. A benefit of

*"We require every school to have an Alternative Language Services Plan to address the needs of English language learners. We now have a number of dual language programs in Spanish and English throughout our schools. Most of our programs are in the elementary schools, but we've started some at the middle school level as well, and these have been very successful. Both native Spanish and English speakers in these programs are scoring high on achievement tests and becoming bilingual at the same time."*

**– Diego Gallegos,  
assistant superintendent,  
Albuquerque,  
New Mexico  
Public Schools**

this approach over native language assessments is that the native language of the EL learner is not an issue since the assessment is in English. More research, however, is needed to prove how effective this approach can be.

A third way to ensure assessments are valid for EL learners is to provide accommodations. While research on this topic is currently limited, valid and appropriate accommodations can assist EL learners in demonstrating their mastery of content without giving them an unfair advantage. Factors to consider in providing accommodations include: the student's level of English proficiency, literacy skills in his/her home language, the amount of schooling he/she received in his/her home country, the language of instruction, cultural issues and the accommodations that are used in the classroom as part of instruction.

Currently, states vary in the type of accommodations that are allowed. Among the accommodations provided are: allowing extra test-taking time, administering tests in small groups, providing bilingual dictionaries or glossaries, flexible scheduling and allowing teachers to clarify the meaning of words on the test when they do not relate to the content being tested. The most effective accommodations appear to be those that address the basic linguistic needs of EL learners (such as providing bilingual dictionaries or glossaries and allowing teachers to clarify the meaning of words) without providing them an advantage over non-ELL students.

## Recommendations

1. **Encourage more research on the effectiveness of simplifying test language.** There appears to be some promise in using simplified language to make assessments more accessible for EL learners. Research in this area, however, remains limited. Policymakers need to encourage and invest in the development of research on how simplifying test language can aid in the more accurate assessment of EL learners' academic skills.
2. **Encourage more research on testing accommodations for EL learners.** Appropriate testing accommodations can assist EL learners in demonstrating their mastery of content without giving them an unfair advantage. More research, however, is needed to inform education leaders as to types of specific accommodations that are both the fairest and the most effective.

## *Providing screening to identify students in need of early intervention in reading*

Increasingly, states are using screening measures in kindergarten and 1st grade to identify students who need intensive early intervention in reading. But not many states are aware that these measures are valid predictors of future reading outcomes for EL learners. This finding has been replicated enough times to become the basis for practice.<sup>12-13</sup>

Research also shows that students' oral language proficiency is not a valid predictor of reading success or failure.<sup>14-15</sup> (That is not to say it is unimportant to assess growth in English proficiency, but not as a means to know who needs help in learning how to read.) Consistently strong measures of future reading growth are measures of phonemic awareness and fluency in naming letters of the alphabet. These measures are valid if administered in English even if the student is an EL learner. It also appears that Spanish versions of phonemic awareness measures are solid predictors.

The key message is that the language of the assessment is less important than the type of assessment. Screening on phonemic awareness and letter-naming fluency as opposed to oral language proficiency is the valid approach to use. This should be seriously considered in state policy.

## Recommendations

- 1. Public policies should be developed to promote early screening of EL learners in reading.** State policymakers should encourage urban school districts to use reading screening measures in kindergarten and 1st grade to identify students who are in need of intensive early intervention in reading. If students are in native language programs, screening should be in the student's native language. If students are in an English-only program, assessment should be in English. Policymakers should be aware, however, that low scores on English assessments do not always signify a reading difficulty. Such low scores can also signify that a student has not yet been taught a particular skill in English and simply needs instruction.
- 2. Screening methods in early reading should be designed to focus on phonemic awareness and letter-naming fluency, as opposed to a student's oral language proficiency.** English language development, however, should still remain a critical component of instruction.

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