

Instruction for English Language Learners

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Across the United States, the number of English learners in our schools has risen dramatically, representing the fastest-growing segment of the student population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2005). Given these trends, our challenge as educators is to provide meaningful, effective instruction that will lead these students to becoming educated, productive citizens.

Many students today struggle to meet high academic standards, but ELLs have the added complexity of having to learn and use high-level academic English as they study challenging content in a new language. Teachers must take into consideration the unique second-language-acquisition needs of English learners and deliver lessons that are appropriate for them. In order to tailor instruction appropriately, however, teachers need to recognize that not all English language learners have the same background, language, or educational profile.

Diversity Among English Language Learners

English language learners are considered *diverse* because they represent different cultures; however, even among English language learners, there is much diversity. Some have limited educational experiences, while others read and write at grade



level in their own language. Many ELLs come from middle-class families with high levels of literacy; others live in poverty without books in their homes. Another way ELLs differ from one another is in their level of first-language development. Conversational fluency develops inside and outside of the classroom and can be attained in one to three years (Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, the language that is critical for educational success—academic language (Cummins, 2000)—is more complex and is developed more slowly and systematically in academic settings. Many ELLs are able to speak conversational English but lack proficiency in academic English.

English language learners require instruction that focuses on developing academic English and is differentiated to meet their academic and linguistic needs. While ELLs can and should be expected to participate in grade-level, standards-based instruction, they must also have the concepts, skills, and information presented in a way that is consistent with their level of academic background and English proficiency level. Particularly in their first years of schooling, ELLs can't be expected to perform like native English speakers. The same content can be taught, ensuring that students are making appropriate academic progress, but the presentation of the concepts and skills, the complexity of the language in the reading passage, the type of tasks expected to be completed, and the difficulty of the assignments will vary.

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Best Practices

Best practices for English learners involve a number of strategies and techniques that make content comprehensible and provide opportunities for practice using academic English (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). These strategies include the following:

Using supplementary materials to make the lesson clear and meaningful. These materials include graphs, leveled readers, Web sites, models, vocabulary cards, and visuals. Supplementary materials bring content information to life through their application and extension of the written word. These materials also provide opportunities for practicing academic English.

Opportunities for interaction. Whole-group instruction may be best suited for introducing a lesson or unit, for teaching a specific skill, and for modeling. English language learners benefit from opportunities to practice using academic English. Working in pairs allows students to interact by using academic English in a nonthreatening situation. Small groups may be used to practice and reinforce skills and concepts at the students' level of proficiency. Another purpose for interaction is to encourage students to use elaborated responses about the lesson's concepts, moving beyond yes/no and single-word comments (Goldenberg, 1992–93).

Explicitly linking content concepts to students' background experiences. Students come to school with a wealth of experiences, sometimes culturally specific experiences. These funds of knowledge provide teachers with opportunities to make important links between the topic and students' own experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992).

Using a variety of techniques to make the content concepts clear. These techniques include modeling, speaking at a rate commensurate with students' English proficiency, using visuals, and using gestures—anything that supports and assists students' understanding of the lesson's language and concepts.

For English language learners, a “one size fits all” approach will not offer the learning opportunities they need to make adequate academic progress and meet high academic standards. These students face the demands of learning both content and English simultaneously. Linguistically appropriate, high-quality instruction for English language learners must be a priority in our schools.

Biography

Jana Echevarria is a Professor at California State University, Long Beach, in the College of Education. She is experienced in teaching at the elementary, secondary, and university levels, with a background in general education, special education, bilingual education and ESL. She has lived in Taiwan and Mexico, where she taught ESL and second-language acquisition courses at the university level, as well as in Spain, where she conducted research on instructional programs for immigrant students. After receiving her M.S. in Bilingual Special Education from California State University, she earned her Ph.D. in Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and was one of the recipients of the National Association for Bilingual Education's Outstanding Dissertations Competition.

Over the past 15 years, Dr. Echevarria has given over 60 professional presentations, with an emphasis on instruction for educationally and linguistically at-risk students. Her research and publications focus on effective instruction for language-minority students, particularly those with learning disabilities. She has written numerous journal articles and book chapters, has written and produced two videotapes, and has coauthored two books. Dr. Echevarria is currently a Principal Investigator with the U.S. Department of Education, OERI (Office of Educational Research and Improvement), NIEARS (National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students), and CREDE (Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence) where she has been conducting a study on “The Effects of Sheltered Instruction on the Achievement of Limited English Proficient Students.”

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