

English Language Learners

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A Nation with Multiple Languages

Many immigrants and refugees have come to the United States over the years, and when an increase in newcomers reminds us of this fact, we often express concerns. In the past 30 years, the foreign-born population of the U.S. has tripled, more than 14 million immigrants moved to the U.S. during the 1990s, and another 14 million are expected to arrive between 2000 and 2010. These numbers have led to reports about an emerging and underserved population of students who are English language learners (ELLs).

Some reports portray English language learners as a new and homogeneous population. Actually ELLs are a highly heterogeneous and complex group of students, with diverse gifts, educational needs, backgrounds, languages, and goals. Some ELL students come from homes in which no English is spoken, while some come from homes where only English is spoken; others have been exposed to or use multiple languages. ELL students may have a deep sense of their non-U.S. culture, a strong sense of multiple cultures, or identify only with U.S. culture. Some ELL students are stigmatized for the way they speak English; some are stigmatized for speaking a language other than



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ELLs are a highly heterogeneous and complex group of students.

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English; some are stigmatized for speaking English. Some ELL students live in cultural enclaves while their fellow ELL students are surrounded by non-ELL families; some ELL students' families have lived in the U.S. for over a generation. Some may be high achievers in school while others struggle. They may excel in one content area and need lots of support in another. Some feel capable in school while others are alienated from schooling.

In the largest sense, all students are learning English, and each ELL student falls at a different point on the spectrums of experiences described above. One thing is certain: there is no one profile for an ELL student, nor is one single response adequate to meet their educational goals and needs. ELL students are a diverse group that offers challenges and opportunities to U.S. education and to English language arts teachers in particular.¹

The Many Faces of English Language Learners (ELLs)

Statistics

ELLs are the fastest growing segment of the student population. The highest growth occurs in grades 7–12, where ELLs increased by approximately 70 percent between 1992 and 2002. ELLs now comprise 10.5 percent of the nation's K–12 enrollment, up from 5 percent in 1990.²

ELLs do not fit easily into simple categories; they comprise a very diverse group. Recent research shows that 57 percent of adolescent ELLs were born in the U.S., while 43 percent were born elsewhere. ELLs have varied levels of language proficiency, socio-economic standing, expectations of schooling, content knowledge, and immigration status.³

ELL students are increasingly present in all U.S. states. Formerly, large ELL populations were concentrated in a few states, but today almost all states have populations of ELLs. States in the Midwest and Intermountain West have seen increases in the number of ELL students; in Illinois, for example, enrollments of Hispanic undergraduates grew by 80 percent in the last decade.⁴ Nationwide, approximately 43 percent of secondary educators teach ELLs.⁵

ELLs sometimes struggle academically. In 2005, 4 percent of ELL eighth graders achieved proficiency on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) versus 31 percent of all eighth graders who were found to be proficient. Non-native English speakers 14–18 years old were 21 percent less likely to have completed high school than native English speakers.⁶



Key Terms

The terms used to describe ELLs blur, overlap, and change with time, as well as with shifting socio-political dynamics.

ELL (English Language Learner): an active learner of the English language who may benefit from various types of language support programs. This term is used mainly in the U.S. to describe K–12 students.

ESL (English as a Second Language): formerly used to designate ELL students; this term increasingly refers to a program of *instruction* designed to support the ELL. It is still used to refer to multilingual students in higher education.

LEP (Limited English Proficiency): employed by the U.S. Department of Education to refer to ELLs who lack sufficient mastery of English to meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom. Increasingly, English Language Learner (ELL) is used to describe this population, because it highlights learning, rather than suggesting that non-native-English-speaking students are deficient.

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Students: non-native-English-speaking students who are learning English in a country where English is not the primary language.

1.5 Generation Students: graduates of U.S. high schools who enter college while still learning English; may include refugees and permanent residents as well as naturalized and native-born citizens of the U.S.⁷

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Recent Policy History

Over the last 40 years, U.S. English language education has been shaped by a variety of legal and legislative decisions. In 1968, the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII) acknowledged the educational challenges faced by ELLs and allocated funds to support their learning. Title VII was amended and reauthorized a number of times, and in 2002, the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act (Title III of NCLB) replaced the Bilingual Education Act. NCLB requires that schools report adequate yearly progress (AYP) for four subgroups of students, one of which is ELL students. The NCLB definition gives states considerable flexibility in defining their ELL subgroup, which has led to inconsistency across districts and schools regarding the designation of ELL.

Voters have also had a direct impact on English language education policy. California's 1998 Proposition 227, for example, requires that all California public schools conduct instruction in English. It also mandates that ELLs be taught "overwhelmingly in English" through



sheltered/structured English immersion and then transferred to a mainstream English-language classroom. Voters in Arizona and Massachusetts have approved similar initiatives, and 25 states have English-only laws which shape ELL education. However, there is no evidence that statewide English-only initiatives improve the learning outcomes of ELLs.⁸

Common Myths about ELL Students

Myth: Many ELLs have disabilities, which is why they are often over-represented in special education.

Reality: While it is true that a disproportionate number of ELLs are represented in special education, placement rates vary with the size of the ELL population in each state and access to ELL programs. Studies find that current assessments that do not differentiate between disabilities and linguistic differences can lead to misdiagnosis of ELLs. Unfortunately, inappropriate placements in special education can limit the growth of ELLs without disabilities. Research suggests that ELLs with disabilities can learn, and early intervention can prevent academic failure. Inclusive environments that provide challenging rather than remedial instruction will be most effective.⁹

Myth: Children learn a second language quickly and easily.

Reality: A variety of socio-cultural factors can affect language learning. ELL students might face additional challenges such as acclimating to a new culture and status that interfere with learning English. Given this, instructors should use

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culturally relevant materials to build on students' linguistic and cultural resources, while teaching language through content and themes. Students should be encouraged to use native language strategically, and will be motivated by student-centered activities. Because English language learning is a recursive process, educators should integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills into instruction from the start.¹⁰

Myth: When an ELL student is able to speak English fluently, he or she has mastered it.

Reality: Some teachers may assume that students who have good oral English need no further support to succeed academically, but everyday oral language uses different rhetoric, structure, and vocabulary. Furthermore, research indicates that oral language should be systematically assessed with instruments that are academically oriented.¹¹

Myth: All ELL students learn English in the same way.

Reality: ELLs' prior schooling, socio-economic position, content knowledge, and immigration status create variety in their learning processes.¹² Some ELLs speak languages with English cognates, while others speak languages with little lexical similarity to English; this changes the nature of how students learn content-specific vocabulary.¹³

Myth: Providing accommodations for ELL students only benefits those students.

Reality: Research suggests that making mainstream classrooms more ELL-responsive will also make them more responsive to under-served learners generally. Many cognitive aspects of reading are common to both native speakers of English and ESL learners, though research shows that teachers should pay additional attention to background knowledge, interaction, and word use with ELLs.¹⁴



Myth: Teaching ELLs means only focusing on vocabulary.

Reality: Students need to learn forms and structures of academic language, they need to understand the relationship between forms and meaning in written language, and they need opportunities to express complex meanings, even when their English language proficiency is limited.¹⁵

Research-Based Recommendations for Effective ELL Instruction

For teachers ...

Present ELLs with challenging curricular content. Curricula should be organized around “big questions,” involve authentic reading and writing experiences, and provide textual choices as well as meaningful content for students.¹⁶

Set high expectations for ELLs. ELLs will perform much better if placed according to academic achievement rather than language proficiency; placement in challenging classes with quality instruction will enable them to learn more.¹⁷

Use technology effectively. Greater access to technology and computer-assisted learning can be effective in engaging ELLs' motivation, developing writing and editing skills, and tapping into the collaborative potential of class websites and blogs.¹⁸

Recognize socio-cultural factors. Awareness of students' backgrounds, recognition of their prior literacy experiences, and knowledge

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of the challenges and benefits that ELLs experience when learning a second language can enable teachers to be more effective. These challenges include: understanding implicit cultural knowledge and norms; developing metalinguistic awareness; learning to codeswitch and translate; dealing with political, cultural, and social dimensions of language status issues; negotiating disparities between home/community and school literacy practices.¹⁹

Position native languages and home environments as resources. Teachers can help ELLs see their native languages and family cultures as resources that contribute to education rather than something to be overcome or cast aside. For example, research shows how students' extracurricular composing develops ELLs' abilities in text comprehension, collaboration with peers, and construction of a writerly identity. Teachers can use these techniques to reduce the distance between home and school, while helping ELLs to become more invested in school learning.²⁰

Teach ELLs in grades K–8 the basics of academic literacy. Focusing on content-specific and academic vocabulary, engaging students with class objectives, and encouraging them to write summaries of their learning, as recommended

by models like Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy, Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), gives ELLs skills they can use in many academic subjects.²¹ In addition, helping ELLs make connections between academic content and their own funds of knowledge about home and community literacies can help students see these knowledges as resources for building academic literacy.²²

Teach ELLs in secondary school, like their K–8 peers, to simultaneously develop their skill with academic English and learn content in a variety of disciplines. Contexts of learning shift rapidly for ELLs in secondary school; on a daily basis they encounter several different teaching styles, varying tasks, multiple expectations, and a range of interaction styles. ELLs' own socio-economic status, prior schooling, content knowledge, and immigration status also contribute to this variety.²³

Recognize the difference between ELLs and under-prepared students in higher education. Because first-year composition usually serves as a "gateway" course, it poses challenges for some college ESL students, including some who have attended U.S. high schools. ESL students who are new to the U.S. face the additional challenge of acclimating to a new culture and status at the same time they are learning English.²⁴ Conditions for their learning, especially in first-year composition, should include no more than 15 students per class,²⁵ and college instructors, as well as K–12 teachers, need to recognize students' prior literacy experiences, provide connections to new learning, and give explicit instructions regarding expectations for work.

Definitions

- **Codeswitching** entails alternating between two languages or linguistic codes within a single sentence or conversation and is a common practice of ELLs which teachers can use to increase students' awareness of their linguistic practices.
- **Cognates** are words in two languages that have a common etymology.
- **Metalinguistic Awareness** means understanding *what* language does rather than just *how* to use it.
- **First Language** is the native language or mother tongue, often abbreviated as L1.
- **Second Language** is learned in addition to the first language, often abbreviated as L2.

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For schools and policymakers . . .

Delineate explicit expectations for ELLs. Successful programs require an explicit delineation of what students should be able to know and do in order to succeed at a given level. This means that state curriculum frameworks and/or content-area standards need to address ELLs specifically so that their literacy strengths and challenges can be addressed.²⁶

Provide research-based professional development for teachers of ELLs. Less than 13 percent of teachers have received professional development on teaching ELLs, and despite the growing numbers of ELLs, only three states have policies that require all teachers to have some expertise in teaching ELLs effectively. As a result, most ELLs find themselves in mainstream classrooms taught by teachers with little or no formal preparation for working with a linguistically diverse student population.²⁷ Well-meaning teachers with inadequate training can sabotage their own efforts to create positive learning environments through hyper-criticism of errors; not seeing native language usage as an appropriate scaffold; ignoring language errors.²⁸

Attend to processes and consequences of assessment of ELLs. Assessment carries major consequences for ELLs since it can determine what services will be available to the individual, how opportunities for learning will be distributed, and the category to which an individual will be assigned. The following research-based guidelines show how policy can be shaped to make the assessment of ELLs fair and effective.

Recognize ELLs' heterogeneity. ELLs have many faces, and these need to be considered in making decisions about assessment. This means:

- adapt nationwide or federally mandated standardized testing (such as NCLB) to accommodate the needs of ELLs
- avoid any single assessment and insist on multiple assessments
- recognize that the term ELL can refer to either *eligible* students or those *enrolled* in special programs
- determine whether the ELL designation is based on *spoken* English proficiency or *written* tests
- consider the amount and duration of exposure to English.²⁹

Avoid testing in English exclusively. ELLs who have academic content knowledge and/or native language literacy skills may not be able to demonstrate that knowledge in English. Assessment should:

- acknowledge that ELLs may have difficulty comprehending the language and format of a test in English
- try to separate language factors from content knowledge
- recognize that tests in English include cultural and historical knowledge that may be unfamiliar to ELLs.³⁰

Use multiple assessments for varying purposes.

Adequate assessment of ELL students will include multiple measures in order to distinguish among content knowledge, literacy skills, language acquisition, and cultural background. Assessment should:

- provide formative assessment during the learning process to help shape instruction, foster academic growth, and enhance motivation
- promote metacognition with self-assessment
- administer summative assessment to gather data about ELLs
- assess content knowledge with evaluation measures designed for ELLs.³¹

Adhere to ethical principles of testing. Since assessment can be used to direct instruction and shape power relations as well as impose life-changing effects on ELL students, all testing should:

- assure that the assessment used will produce the desired information
- offer appropriate testing accommodations by reducing the linguistic complexity of assessment tools wherever possible³²
- use test results for appropriate purposes
- guard against allowing test results to shape attitudes toward ELL students
- call upon principles of fairness for ELLs who are successful in content classes but cannot pass a required English exit exam or ESL class³³
- avoid applying testing accommodations designed for disabilities, instead assigning accommodations that are language-based or consistent with students' language needs.³⁴

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