

Research to Inform Academic English Language Development

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English 3D was designed to accelerate language development for English learners who have agility with social interactional English while lacking the advanced linguistic knowledge and skills required by complex coursework in school.

English 3D propels students to higher language proficiency through a consistent series of lessons derived from research-based principles and classroom-tested practices that maximize students' verbal and written engagement with conceptually rigorous content.

LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS: A NATIONAL ISSUE

Secondary educators across the United States are becoming deeply concerned about the English learners in their classrooms who, despite having completed most or all of their primary education in American schools, have striking gaps in their English knowledge, weak communication skills, and disappointing academic profiles. These long-term English learners do not fit traditional typologies of “Limited English Proficient” secondary school students who typically are: (1) well-educated newcomers with high-quality schooling in their home countries; (2) under-schooled newcomers with limited formal education in their home countries; or (3) normatively progressing foreign-born students who are making steady progress in acquiring English.

While many middle and high schools serve a percentage of recent US arrivals, the vast majority of secondary English learners have been enrolled in American schools since kindergarten. As an illustration, New York City reports one out of three English learners in Grades 6–12 is a US-educated long-term English learner (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2007). In California the majority (59%) of middle and high school English learners have been enrolled in US classrooms for more than six years without acquiring the language and academic skills necessary to thrive in standards-based coursework (Olsen, 2010).

A common assumption has been that US-educated English learners would exit elementary school solidly equipped with second-language knowledge and literacy skills to compete on equal footing with native English speakers. By definition, English learners begin the school term lacking the linguistic skills to fully access the core curriculum. The staggering percentage of adolescent English learners who continue to experience linguistic barriers and who have not been reclassified as proficient English speakers is testimony to the fact that their instructional needs have not been adequately met (Flores, Painter, Harlow-Nash, & Pachon, 2009). Achievement gap studies also glaringly indicate that English learners who are not reclassified are often tracked into lower-level coursework and are at greater risk of not graduating (Kim & Herman, 2009).

CHARACTERISTICS OF LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS

While most long-term English learners have a comfortable command of everyday English, they are characteristically stalled at intermediate proficiency, have insufficient vocabulary and syntactic knowledge to complete rigorous literacy assignments, and perform poorly on standards-aligned state and national tests. The academic performance of these students ranges from simply getting by to seriously struggling with unacceptably high rates of D and F grades. Some are painfully aware of their linguistic and academic

shortcomings while others have yet to recognize the implications of languishing at the intermediate English proficiency level for multiple years. Within core classes, many exhibit passive, disengaged learning behaviors, immature organization and study skills, and a tenuous grasp of scholarly demeanor (Olsen, 2010).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS

Many factors contribute to English learners failing to acquire the social and academic language to meet grade-level norms: elementary and middle school Language Arts curricula that weren't designed for second-language students; extended periods of time with no targeted English language support; placement into literacy interventions without a tandem focus on English language development; teachers with insufficient training and time to design daily lessons including both content and relevant English language objectives; social segregation and linguistic isolation (Menken et al., 2007; Olsen, 2010).

The predictable English placement options for these protracted English learners lack appropriate curricula, dedicated time, and trained staff to address their second-language voids and persistent errors. Side by side with native English speakers, long-term English learners are enrolled in an intensive reading intervention class working on decoding skills, fluency, and comprehension strategies, or a mainstream Language Arts class with a second hour of support in analyzing and responding to literature. Neither placement reliably integrates language objectives and targeted, dynamic lessons to equip English learners with the linguistic tools that would help them tackle daunting reading and writing assignments (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

AN EXAMINATION OF TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL WISDOM

Consistently dismaying statistics regarding English proficiency in Grades 6–12 point to the need for an examination of standard wisdom in the field of English learner instruction. Saunders and Goldenberg (2010) emphasize that in the absence of a comprehensive body of research, the field of English instruction for school-age second-language students has been driven in great part by theory and hypotheses.

The result is a body of widely accepted “communicative classroom practices” centered upon the perspective that students essentially learn a second language by interacting with others. In this social learning process, formal linguistic knowledge and planned, explicit instruction or timely error correction are de-emphasized, with the assumption that students will implicitly acquire the forms and rules of a second language while engaging in meaningful dialogue and attempts to resolve communication breakdowns (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1985). Krashen (1985) additionally proposes that nonnative speakers largely acquire English through exposure to “comprehensible input” or understandable messages in natural, low-anxiety communicative contexts. This comprehensible input is language pitched slightly beyond the learner’s current proficiency level while including new linguistic forms. In this instructional model, collaborative tasks and sustained, silent recreational reading become instructional cornerstones, with specific attention to grammatical and vocabulary lesson targets being more ad hoc, as need arises.

English language acquisition scholars and practitioners have observed that voluntary pleasure reading and natural classroom interactions with peers do not predictably introduce students to vocabulary and grammatical structures characteristic of academic English (Scarcella, 1996). Swain (1986) further clarifies that to complement “comprehensible input,” English learners require routine

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classroom opportunities to engage in “comprehensible output.” They must receive instruction in increasingly complex language forms and be placed in purposeful speaking and writing contexts that require attention to *how* they are communicating, not simply *if* they are communicating.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Advanced English is imperative for youths whose educational and professional aspirations hinge upon communicative competence in the dominant language. Being able to converse in English with relative ease is not a bold enough instructional goal. New national K–12 standards and assessments and an increasingly sophisticated workplace exert tremendous pressures on school-age English learners to develop *accurate fluency*, the ability to effortlessly produce error-free, contextually appropriate language (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010). As we design language instruction for adolescent English learners, we must look to classroom principles and practices that are supported by available research.

1 Augment core English classes with a dedicated English language development period.

Current research and best practices for long-term English learners recommend clustered placement into grade-level content classes mixed with English proficient students. English learners need to interact academically with skilled English speakers to learn a target-like version of spoken English. To advance in their academic standing, they must also have access to rigorous curricula at their grade levels (Olsen, 2010; Scarcella, 2003).

English learners also require dedicated time for second-language learning and practice. A number of researchers have observed that effective content teaching is not synonymous with effective language teaching (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Ramirez, 1992). In fact, due to time constraints, curricular complexities, and aggressive testing schedules, content standards invariably trump instruction in relevant English speaking and listening skills. There is ample evidence that proficiency in English requires targeted, systematic, and explicit instruction in a clear course of second-language study rather than ad hoc, incidental lessons within another discipline (Norris & Ortega, 2006; Saunders &

Goldenberg, 2010). Without informed, intentional instruction in how English works—vocabulary, word usage, grammatical features, and syntactic structures—and daily structured rehearsals, English learners will not develop a competent command of English.

2 Extend prior knowledge of language and content.

Youths from culturally diverse backgrounds may struggle with comprehending a text or lesson concept because their schema or world knowledge does not match those of the culture for which the text was written (Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996). Helping learners retrieve and enhance relevant background knowledge through brainstorming, visual media, or direct experiences increases the likelihood of learning and retention. Tying new information to students’ background experiences, whether personal, cultural, or academic, establishes critical linkages for students who are already at a linguistic disadvantage in terms of lesson comprehension (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2007).

Building and using critical vocabulary as a curricular anchor positively impacts text comprehension and related discussion for English learners (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Students benefit from multimodal instruction that actively involves them in pronouncing, decoding, and adeptly applying pivotal lesson vocabulary, including topic-related and high-utility words they will encounter in materials across subject areas (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010).

3 Explicitly teach language elements.

In their analysis of 77 studies on second-language teaching practices, Norris and Ortega (2006) drew strong conclusions regarding the benefits of form-focused, explicit teaching methods for older English learners. The researchers pinpointed three essential elements of explicit language teaching: (1) conscientiously directing students’ attention to a new word, grammatical form, or language rule; (2) clearly explaining and demonstrating the language element; and (3) providing ample opportunities for use of the language target in meaningful, scaffolded, and monitored contexts. In explicit language instruction, students’ interactions with a new language target are carefully orchestrated, moving from teacher modeling and explanation, to guided practice with the teacher, to structured practice with peers, to independent application.

Indirect, implicit language teaching methods have a comparatively negligible impact on student language learning. For example, if a teacher merely leads choral repetition of a model response to a lesson question but doesn't dissect the sentence and point out the grammatical and vocabulary targets, English learners are unlikely to independently extract the linguistic principles and produce an equally strong statement. Spada and Lightbown (2008) argue that instruction that helps English learners take notice of specific linguistic elements makes it far more likely that students will acquire them.

4 Utilize consistent instructional routines.

Adolescent English learners must cope with the double demands of learning rigorous content in core courses and a second language (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Compounding this curricular complexity is the diversity of instructional strategies utilized by teachers within and across the subject areas. When English learners are routinely adjusting to new classroom expectations and instructional practices, little cognitive capital is available to grapple with new concepts, language, and skills. If, for example, a teacher uses an inconsistent array of strategies and activities to build vocabulary knowledge, English learners are unlikely to internalize the steps in each process and the teacher's expectations for performance. A consistent set of instructional routines with clear teacher and student roles, steps, and language targets maximizes student engagement and second-language development (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Goldenberg, 2008).

5 Model verbal and written academic English.

In many classrooms and communities, English learners are surrounded by peers who are also struggling with English. For many underperforming students, the only reliable context for rich and varied exposure to spoken English is the classroom. Teachers can facilitate advanced English acquisition by serving as an eloquent and articulate user of both academic and social language. Using complete sentences, precise vocabulary, and a more formal register during lessons will model appropriate classroom language and create a supportive climate for second-language production and experimentation. Similarly, English learners benefit from extensive exposure to engaging and effectively written academic English. Because English learners

are expected to write essays and research papers, they must have exemplars of sentences and paragraphs that model the vocabulary and sentence patterns of academic discourse (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Not all reading material is ideal input for developing academic English, however. Scarcella (2003) highlights the advantages of text that is "well formed, coherent and cohesive, interesting and engaging . . . that contains the features of academic English." Currently, secondary English curriculum is literature centric. Novels and short stories do not provide examples of the complex sentences and discourse features for standards-based academic writing. In contrast, issue-based informational articles, as called for in the Common Core State Standards, have the advantage of addressing real-world topics that pique students' curiosity and model the syntactic complexity and precise vocabulary that students will need in their academic writing.

6 Orchestrate peer interactions with clear language targets.

To make second-language acquisition gains, English learners must have daily opportunities to communicate using more sophisticated social and academic English. Oral language proficiency underscores reading and writing competence (August & Shanahan, 2006). Research in the general education context, English Language Development classrooms, and every model of bilingual education illustrates that most English learners are passive observers during lessons. Their verbal contributions are rare and typically limited to brief inaudible utterances in response to teacher questions (Arreaga-Mayer & Perdomo-Rivera, 1996; Ramirez, 1992). Small-group and partnering activities also routinely fail to promote substantive oral language growth. Merely increasing English learner interaction without language objectives and required application can lead to efficient yet inequitable discussions in casual interactional English (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Gersten & Baker, 2000). Devoid of explicit language targets and clearly communicated expectations for application, even cooperative structures such as Think-Pair-Share can easily devolve into informal partner chats lacking academic rigor. Orchestrating peer interactions with clear roles, language targets, accountability for implementation, and meticulous monitoring ensures gains in oral language proficiency (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).

7 Monitor language production conscientiously.

Assigned interactive activities without established language goals, adolescent English learners focus more on “friendly discourse” than on producing and eliciting conceptually competent responses with linguistic accuracy (Foster & Ohta, 2005). To instill in students a sense of accountability to contribute equitably and responsibly while attending to language forms, teachers must communicate expectations and carefully monitor student interactions. Monitoring English learner communication involves more than redirecting off-task partners. Teachers must conscientiously listen to verbal responses and read written responses to determine whether students are adeptly applying previously taught language. This intentional monitoring can result in unanticipated linguistic challenges and opportunities for productive, form-focused feedback for individuals or subsequent unified-class lessons (Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

8 Provide timely, productive feedback on verbal errors.

A critical component of effective language instruction is teacher feedback to students about the accuracy of their language use. Without form-focused instruction and productive feedback on their spoken and written English, adolescent English learners will never get a handle on their persistent and potentially stigmatizing errors (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). A meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of corrective feedback concluded that it is absolutely essential for older students and enduring in its impact (Russell & Spada, 2006). Teachers of English learners have hesitated to directly correct verbal production errors out of concern that it might raise students’ “affective filter” (Krashen, 1985) and discourage them from contributing. An outgrowth of this reticence is overuse of “recasting,” that is, simply reiterating the student utterance correctly while not pointing out the problem. Research indicates that when teachers rely on this implicit approach, English learners are unlikely to comprehend that they are in fact even being corrected (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Corrective feedback on verbal production errors can be offered in ways that are at once timely, effective, and respectful. Elicitations of the correct form and metalinguistic prompts have been shown to be more effective for short-term and long-term language learning than recasting. Teachers who provide explicit instruction on specific language elements and orchestrate meaningful application are in the most advantageous position for responsive feedback on language use. When students have linguistic awareness developed from conscientious instruction and structured practice, a teacher can more easily guide them in identifying an error and self-correcting. If learners are routinely engaged in meaning-focused activities without prior linguistic guidance and formal understanding, they have little cognitive capital to draw from during spontaneous corrections, whether implicit or explicit.

CONCLUSION

With the burgeoning population of English learners in the United States, we cannot rely on good intentions, common teaching wisdom, and curricula designed for proficient English speakers to adequately address English learners’ acute second-language learning needs. The staggering numbers of long-term English learners entering our secondary schools should serve as a wake-up call for serious introspection about existing curriculum and instruction. Effective English language development has been proven by current research and promising practices to be far more than just “good teaching.” We must provide a dedicated context for explicit and informed language instruction that reengages discouraged English learners and equips them with the communicative confidence and competence to realize their academic and personal goals.

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