

# Improving Outcomes for English Learners: High Expectations and Academic Supports

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**N**estor Rodriguez is eager to learn about today's topic but is discouraged when the teacher begins the lesson. Once again he finds that although he has been in this school for five years and speaks English with friends, he can't seem to make sense of what

the text says. He looks at the pictures for clues but, as he has advanced through the grades, there are fewer pictures to assist him with understanding. He wants to please his teacher and complete assignments, but so many words are confusing and he often doesn't know what he is expected to do in order to complete his work. Nestor is considered a long-term English learner (LTEL) because his literacy and academic language growth has stagnated, and he has not experienced the academic progress that was anticipated this year.

Nestor is able to decode many words, but other words that are critical for understanding a passage don't look as they sound and trip him up. He doesn't know the meaning of some words that he can pronounce, which contributes to his overall low comprehension of text. He finds long passages particularly difficult to read, and he has weak English syntax, grammar, and academic vocabulary in writing. Unfortunately, Nestor has been passed from grade to grade without receiving the academic supports and focus on English language development that he needs to advance his language and literacy skills. His teacher is kind, but she accepts his poor academic performance as inevitable. Nestor often languishes during lessons while the teacher's attention is focused on more capable students

Nestor is part of the large and growing English learner population in our schools and, like him, many are long-term English learners. A steady demographic change over the years has resulted in an estimated 25 percent of children coming from immigrant families; they live in households where a language other than English is spoken (Krogstad and Fry, 2014). As the fastest growing student population, English learners will soon be represented in every school in the United States, joining the thousands of schools nationwide that already educate English learners as part of their student body. This new reality has significant implications for schools and the instruction provided by teachers.

Effective teachers understand that English learners are studying complex concepts and processing new content in a new language. These students are capable of meeting high academic standards but require adjustments to the way instruction is presented. If their language needs aren't taken into consideration, they risk becoming long-term English learners.

There is substantial evidence that effective teaching is critical to the success of all students, but in the case of English learners, it begins with believing that these students can be successful. Studies have consistently concluded that teachers' expectations and attitudes have a direct impact on students' achievement and on their view of themselves as learners (Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna, 2014; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). Too often teachers have a deficit view of English learners, failing to look for what they *can* do and then capitalizing on the assets they possess (Nora and Echevarria, 2016). For English learners—and all students—teachers make a significant difference in their lives.

## High Expectations for All Learners

English learners arrive at school with a wealth of experiences, knowledge, preferences, abilities, interests, and native language proficiencies. In other words, they are not blank slates; they are multidimensional individuals who happen to be in the process of acquiring the English language. The following examples illustrate how teachers can recognize the strengths of English learners and maintain high expectations for these students.

**Asset orientation.** Each student has skills on which to build, interests that can be tapped, and cultural knowledge that can be used to enhance learning. In order to have an asset orientation toward English learners, teachers need to get to know their students, their cultures, and their communities. What are their strengths, experiences, struggles, hopes, and dreams? When teachers realize that speaking more than one language is a gift that should be celebrated—and that experiencing multiple cultures is an asset—they are more likely to elevate their expectations for students who they previously viewed only as having “lacking” English skills.

**Understand the continuum of language development.** Some teachers erroneously believe that English learners in upper elementary grades and beyond have missed the window of opportunity for learning English and, as a result, they lower their expectations for these students. However, individuals are capable of becoming proficient in a new language at any age (Baily and Pransky, 2014). Teachers with high expectations for English learners recognize that it takes four to seven years to attain academic language proficiency. Often, the focus is on communicating in a new language, which takes about one to two years to achieve, but social language differs from the language of school or academic English. Teachers with high expectations for English learners understand that students like Nestor, who have a working knowledge of English and are able to communicate with others in conversations and discussions of everyday topics, need specific support in order to develop the language used for academic purposes.

## Academic Language

Many English learners struggle with academic tasks because the language demands are greater than what is required for conversational English. Academic English is more complex

in its sentence structure, level of vocabulary, forms, and functions. Use of academic language permeates even those standards that don't explicitly use the term "academic language" (Walqui and van Lier, 2016). For example, take the required language skills that are reflected in some state standards. Students are asked to execute all of the following:

- Use questions to connect ideas from several speakers.
- Move from explaining one's own ideas to explaining the ideas of others.
- Summarize and synthesize points of disagreement.
- Make logical inferences from the meaning of text.

These and other tasks require more than vocabulary, which is commonly associated with academic language. Having a robust vocabulary is necessary for improving reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. However, academic language also includes oral language development, correct grammar usage, genre knowledge, classroom discourse, and other skills related to literacy (Short and Echevarria, 2016). Standards require a level of academic language use that is challenging for many students, English learners and English-speaking students alike (Filmore and Filmore, 2016). What we know about effective teaching in general serves as the foundation of effective, standards-based instruction for English learners but additional supports are needed (Goldenberg, 2013).

## **Integrating Academic Language With Core Content**

Students benefit from having content presented in ways that make it more understandable. Students like Nestor, for example, understand the main concepts of the lesson more fully when information from text is presented in graphic form, or summarized in a graphic organizer or other graphic display. When Nestor works in small collaborative groups, he is able to more fully complete tasks because the students' collective knowledge and understanding fill in gaps that he and other students may have. He likes when his teacher repeats the same information in different ways and uses visuals and multimedia to give him clues about its meaning. Nestor and other English learners need multiple exposures to words and ideas before they are able to understand at a deep level, so practice and repetition are effective supports.

As Goldenberg (2013) points out, not only is it an effective practice to provide supports or scaffolds for English learners during content teaching, there is a legal mandate that classroom instruction needs to be made meaningful to all English learners (Lau v. Nichols, 1974 Supreme Court decision). Teachers use a variety of techniques and strategies (typically referred to as "sheltered instruction") to make content comprehensible for English learners (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2017). Although much more research needs to be conducted on exactly how to support English learners as they learn rigorous content and develop English proficiency simultaneously, a number of recommendations have been made (August and Shanahan, 2006; Baker et al., 2014; Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2017; Walqui and vanLier, 2016; Zwiers and Crawford, 2011). These include, but are not limited to

- Using visuals and multimedia.
- Providing redundant key information (e.g., visuals, gestures, multimedia).

- Creating daily opportunities to interact with peers about the lesson's content.
- Using language frames to support development of writing and oral language.
- Teaching a set of academic vocabulary words intensively over several days.
- Using cognates across languages when possible (e.g., *production* and *producción*).
- Providing multiple exposures to and experiences with key academic vocabulary.

Many of these recommendations are good for all students, however, they are critical for providing access to grade-level content for English learners. In addition to an emphasis on academic English during content teaching, English learners need to spend specific time each day focusing on English Language Development (ELD) or English as a Second Language (ESL).

## **Designated ELD/ESL**

When Nestor is in his ELD group, he is able to talk about the text with a partner or a small group, which increases his comprehension. He also has more opportunity to practice using academic language. Nestor's experience supports the perspective that second-language learning is a social process developed primarily through meaningful and motivating interactions with others (Saunders, Goldenberg & Marcelletti, 2013). The Common Core and other state standards emphasize development of oral language skills, and English learners need focused instruction on how to use English in various ways and for specific purposes. Research indicates that students who receive focused second-language teaching made significant gains (Saunders et al., 2013)

There are a variety of standards that can be used to guide instruction during this designated instructional time, including state ESL or ELD standards (e.g., California and Texas) and national standards such as TESOL, WIDA, and ELPA21 standards. Teachers utilize these standards for lesson planning and teaching.

During ELD/ESL time, English language development is the primary focus of instruction with core literacy content used as the vehicle for learning. In this way, language is learned in context and important knowledge and concepts are reinforced through language practice. Students are exposed to the same vocabulary and text studied during core literacy time and as a result they develop a deeper understanding of the text and its associated vocabulary.

**Intentional, Purposful Redundancy.** English learners benefit from having words and ideas presented multiple times in a variety of ways. The additional practice with the same or related vocabulary and concepts during designated language study provides the intentional purposeful multiple exposures that these students need to acquire academic language and literacy. When they return to whole-group instruction, they are better equipped to participate in grade-level literacy lessons with their English-speaking peers.

The vast majority of academic struggles are attributed to low literacy levels. Researchers and others have suggested that a credible, plausible approach for helping English learners improve language and literacy skills is to capitalize on ELD/ESL time by reinforcing content used in literacy lessons. Introducing students to a new, unrelated vocabulary and text during ELD/ESL time is counterproductive; that protected time needs to be used to provide English learners with the vocabulary and skills they need to be successful during literacy instruction.

## **Summary**

Improved academic outcomes for English learners begin with teachers who believe that English learners are capable of learning grade-level content alongside their English-speaking peers. English learners benefit from both integrated content and language teaching, as well as from a specific time each day when the focus is on English language development. The reciprocal relationship between literacy lessons and ELD/ESL instruction provides optimal learning opportunities for English learners. When the necessary instructional supports are provided, these students' academic performance and language proficiency improve (Short, Echevarria & Richards-Tutor, 2011), and will result in fewer students becoming long-term English learners (Olsen, 2014).

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