Advertising

Learn It Today, Use It Tomorrow
New one-day workshops bring ASCD authors and experts to your school.
FREE CONSULTATION

CONFERENCE COUNTDOWN
Houston, Tex.
March 21-23, 2015

SHARE

2015 ASCD Conference on Teaching Excellence

June 26–28, 2015
Nashville, Tenn.

Invest in the power of great instruction and learn how to leverage it in classrooms and school districts.

More

Tweets about "@ASCD"

Permissions

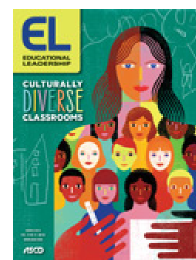
ASCD respects intellectual property rights and adheres to the laws governing them. Learn more about our permissions policy and submit your request online.

Policies and Requests
Translations Rights
Books in Translation

March 2015 | Volume **72** | Number **6**
Culturally Diverse Classrooms Pages 22-26

What It Takes for English Learners to Succeed

Jana Echevarria, Nancy Frey and Doug Fisher



BUY THIS ISSUE

Read Abstract

How can schools help long-term English learners master the basics of English and grow in fluency?

Tomás sits quietly in his 4th grade class hoping the teacher won't call on him. When working with his peers, he is able to understand most of the assignment but feels that he has to whisper in his native Spanish to ask a peer for help. Independent reading and writing tasks are difficult for him, and he often does not finish these assignments on time. Tomás has attended the same school for four years, but there are still times when he feels like he doesn't belong. He wants to do well and make his family proud, but he struggles to make sense of what the teacher expects of him.

Tomás is representative of a growing number of students in U.S. classrooms, those who have spent more than five years in U.S. schools but have not yet attained fluency in English. Students like Tomás are at great risk for becoming long-term English learners. These students account for a large portion of secondary English learners—estimates range from 30 percent to 70 percent—and most have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten (Olsen, 2010). Yet research (for example, August & Shanahan, 2010; Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011) points to effective practices for preventing English learners from becoming long-term English learners. And we have found that under the right conditions, English learners can participate fully in rigorous lessons and achieve high academic standards (Echevarria, 2012; Frey, Fisher, & Nelson, 2013). The effective practices we've seen in research and our own experience can be divided into four areas: access, climate, expectations, and language instruction.

Access

Making the core curriculum comprehensible is central to preventing new English learners from becoming long-term English learners. A growing research base provides practical information about ways teachers can facilitate access for English learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013). Such efforts include differentiated instruction, teacher modeling, language supports, vocabulary development, collaborative conversations, and visual representations. Professional development frequently focuses on these strategies, and many teachers are skilled at providing them.

For example, 4th grade teacher Ms. Pocino uses multimedia so that English learners have visuals to help them comprehend concepts and vocabulary terms. In her lesson on the Gold Rush, she includes video clips, still images from the period, and artifacts such as the pans used to separate gold from gravel.

She also groups students for differentiated instruction. At times, students who need more support are grouped together so that Ms. Pocino can meet with them. At other times, English learners are grouped with more proficient English speakers so they can join collaborative discussions and be exposed to models of proficient English among their peers. Sentence frames (such as *According to the text*, ________ and *On page __ it says ________, which supports the point that ______*) help English learners participate in oral discussions and make claims in their writing.

Although access is necessary, access alone is not sufficient. Yet the support English learners receive too

ASCD EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS INSTITUTES
Turn Theory into Practice
Six Great Topics at a Location Near You
Presented by ASCD Authors and Experts
LEARN MORE

Online Store

ASCD's Top 5 Books

1. *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units*
2. *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical*
3. *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching, 2nd edition*

often begins and ends with access strategies. Effective schools and districts must also focus on climate, expectations, and language instruction.

Climate

Culturally diverse students who are chronically disengaged report that they lack positive relationships with teachers and are aware of disrespect toward their culture or ethnicity (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Culturally responsive teachers create an environment that values diversity and builds on students' different ways of learning, behaving, and using language (Gay, 2010). Their lessons incorporate students' values, beliefs, and experiences, as well as their home language. At the school level, partnerships with the home and community enhance diverse students' engagement in school and sense of belonging.

We think about the climate of the classroom and school at three levels: the individual student, his or her language, and his or her culture. At the individual level, students want to know that their teachers understand and care about them. Effective teachers avoid sarcasm. Instead, they engage in meaningful dialogue with students and foster positive relationships.

For example, Mr. Garcia rotates among small groups of five to six students so that he interacts individually with each student at least twice a week. He makes sure to ask students questions about their experiences or interests and to link those experiences to the lesson. He might ask, "Malik, have you ever had to leave a friend the way Barry did in our story?"

He might also ask students to agree or disagree with an issue discussed in an expository piece. In this way, he gets to know his students and helps them feel comfortable expressing their ideas, knowing that those ideas will be accepted and discussed in a nonthreatening atmosphere.

At the language level, effective teachers celebrate the linguistic differences in their classrooms. Mrs. Peters, whose students have a variety of language backgrounds, often highlights students' linguistic abilities by asking them, "How do you say ___ in your home language?" Because English learners know Mrs. Peters respects their language, when she corrects their English errors, the correction is accepted as evidence of her desire that they become bilingual and biliterate.

At the cultural level, teachers exhibit curiosity, interact in respectful ways, and consider students' cultural experiences when planning content. Rather than occasionally focusing on multicultural foods and holidays, Ms. Robinson regularly links her students' cultures to lessons. When students study colonization and how imperialist ideas affected indigenous people, she asks them to think of a time when mainstream culture conflicted with their home culture. Some students have reported that their culture requires more modesty than mainstream U.S. culture, and others have mentioned that their family responsibilities sometimes conflict with school requirements.

Mrs. Thibodeaux's class provides another useful exemplar. Mrs. Thibodeaux warmly greets students by name each morning and asks brief personal questions: "Are you feeling better today, Alec?" and "Did your team win the game yesterday, Araceli?" Students respond with bits of information about their lives. These brief interactions not only demonstrate a genuine interest in students, but also give Mrs. Thibodeaux knowledge about her students. Students' interests might inform grouping or text selection, their physical or emotional state might lead her to alter the day's demands, and the awareness that a parent has moved away or is ill can help her be more responsive.

Mrs. Thibodeaux recognizes that English learners' understanding of topics and concepts often exceeds their English language ability. Just because a student can't speak English fluently doesn't mean that student can't use higher levels of cognition and respond to higher-order questions. She encourages English learners to use their home language to clarify points or to express their ideas to a more proficient English speaker who shares their language background, and who then scaffolds their participation in the group discussion.

Expectations

Decades of research suggest that teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations affect student performance. The notion that English learners aren't capable of meeting high academic standards is rooted in low expectations for these students, expectations often tied to their socioeconomic status. However, poverty isn't the greatest predictor of success for English learners; rather, their success is influenced primarily by their level of first-language development and the quality of instruction they receive (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). English learners are capable of participating in lessons at their grade level, and they learn in many of the same ways that English-proficient students do, especially when their teachers believe that they can and when their teachers have the skills to ensure students achieve.

One way teachers express their expectations for students is through their daily lessons. The learning target or objective for a given class provides significant information about what the teacher thinks students are capable of accomplishing. Sometimes, a teacher with low expectations sets the learning target two or more years behind the students' grade level or age. A learning target for a group of 6th graders that reads, "identify the theme of the text" suggests that the teacher expects students to complete work that is at the 4th grade level. At the 6th grade level, students should be expected to determine how specific details convey that theme. When the learning target or objective is below grade level, the teacher may need help determining what instructional supports he or she can provide to help students reach high levels. Or it may mean the teacher doesn't believe specific groups of students are capable of learning rigorous content; this teacher might benefit from seeing students in another classroom mastering such work.

4. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, 2nd Edition*

5. *The Core Six: Essential Strategies for Achieving Excellence with the Common Core*

Shop

Another aspect of clear expectations for English learners relates to the language that the teacher uses and expects students to use. A teacher who says "flip it" rather than "invert" as part of a mathematics lesson may be demonstrating lower expectations. That's not to say that teachers should refrain from embedding definitions in their language, but saying something like, "I'd like your group to reach consensus, meaning that you agree on the answer" supports students' language development while conveying an expectation that students will understand and use academic language.

English learners deserve to be enrolled in a rigorous course of study, with support. This support may be a supplemental class, but it should not prevent students from having the same opportunities as native English speakers. Students who are beginning English speakers need time to develop basic proficiency, but their course of study must rapidly begin to include academic content in science, social studies, the arts, and technical subjects if they are ever to develop the background knowledge and experiences necessary for academic success.

Further, schools that hope to prevent students from becoming long-term English learners foster students' aspirations. Teachers and administrators in those schools provide students with opportunities to consider a wide range of career and college choices, to engage in field studies, and to complete internships in areas of interest. For example, the students at Health Sciences High complete a field study every three weeks. On these days, students spend time in the community collecting information they can use in their classes. In a field study at the local tide pools, students use their phones to take pictures they will write about later and collect water samples they will analyze back at school.

At Garfield High School, students in the culinary arts program have numerous internships that contribute to their understanding of restaurants and customer service. Students intern one day per week at the convention center, learning how to manage large groups and ensure that the people who visit have a great experience. As they get older and have more experience, they intern in local restaurants, examining all aspects of restaurant operations, from prep work to cooking to customer service.

Language Instruction

English learners require explicit language instruction for a dedicated period of time each day to gain English proficiency. As English learners move through the grades, they may become proficient in spoken English but still need focused, explicit instruction in academic English, the language required for school tasks, texts, and tests. Without explicit English language development, most English learners stall at the intermediate level of English proficiency and become long-term English learners (Olsen, 2010).

Academic language comprises more than vocabulary, although a robust vocabulary is necessary. Academic language also encompasses oral language, grammar, genre knowledge, and other literacy skills (Short & Echevarria, in press). Teachers can systematically address language development by designing and posting language objectives.

Ms. Pham writes content and language objectives for every lesson and reviews them with students at the outset of teaching the material. Thus, students know the purpose of the lesson (investigate an endangered animal using multiple resources, provide evidence for conclusions); and they know what language skills are required to complete the lesson or further develop their academic language proficiency (engage in discussion using key vocabulary, use past and future verb tenses in writing).

Ms. Pham relies on her state's English language development standards to guide selection of language objectives, focusing on one aspect (such as verb tenses) for a given period of time. In addition, she analyzes the type of language students will need to be successful in the lesson. In the example above, students need to learn key vocabulary to be able to write about endangered animals and cite evidence. Ms. Pham explicitly teaches the meaning of the words at the beginning of the lesson and has students use the words in discussions. Each group has a discussion rubric to encourage students to use these words.

Throughout the lesson, Ms. Pham reminds students of the lesson's objectives. She encourages them to cite evidence for conclusions (content objectives) and to practice using particular language forms and vocabulary terms (language objectives). As the class reads and takes notes to prepare for their discussion on endangered animals, she points out past-tense and future-tense forms they come across and writes them out for students to see and refer to later. During collaborative discussions, she circulates among groups asking about the rubric and whether students are using the vocabulary terms. Before students commence writing, she reminds them of the objectives. For 30 minutes each day, an English as a second language teacher works with the English learners in Ms. Pham's class, reinforcing the language students have been learning and practicing.

It's About Time for Success

The four areas of focus—access, climate, expectations, and language—are equally important and interdependent. Educators need to think about all four areas and determine where they are strong and what they need to work on. In areas that need improvement, educators can collaborate with colleagues to identify ways to close the gap. That's what it will take for English learners to succeed.

References

August, D., & Shanahan, T. (2010). Effective English literacy instruction for English learners. In California Department of Education (Ed.), *Improving education for English learners: Research-*

based approaches (pp. 209–250). Sacramento, CA: CDE Press.

Echevarria, J. (2012). *Effective practices for increasing the achievement of English learners.* Washington, DC: Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners.

Echevarria, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D. (2013). *Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP Model*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Nelson, J. (2013). *Todo tiene que ver con lo que se habla:* It's all about the talk. *Phi Delta Kappan, 94*(6), 8–13.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Goldenberg, C., & Coleman, R. (2010). *Promoting academic achievement among English learners: A guide to the research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Olsen, L. (2010). *Reparable harm: Fulfilling the unkept promise of educational opportunity for California's long term English learners*. Long Beach: Californians Together.

Short, D., & Echevarria, J. (in press). *Developing academic language with the SIOP model*. Boston: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

Short, D., Echevarria, J., & Richards-Tutor, C. (2011). Research on academic literacy development in sheltered instruction classrooms. *Language Teaching Research*, *15*(3), 363–380.

Suarez-Orozco, C., Suarez-Orozco, M. M., & Todorova, I. (2008). *Learning in a new land: Immigrant students in American society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jana Echevarria is professor emerita at California State University, Long Beach. She is codeveloper of the SIOP Model (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) and coauthor of the SIOP Model book series. Nancy Frey and Doug Fisher are professors in the Department of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University and teacher leaders at Health Sciences High and Middle College. They are the joint authors of many books, including *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom* (2nd ed., ASCD, 2014).

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:
diverse classrooms and schools, culturally responsive teaching, english language learners

Copyright © 2015 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

For **photocopy**, **electronic and online access**, and **republication requests**, go to the Copyright Clearance Center. Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.

To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org

0 comments

Log in to submit a comment.

To post a comment, please log in above. (You must be an ASCD EDge community member.)
Free registration

1703 North Beauregard St.
Alexandria, VA 22311-1714

ABOUT ASCD
Contact Us
Help

CONNECT WITH US
Affiliates
Connected Communities

ONLINE STORE
ASCD Store Home
Books & E-Books

PROGRAMS
Conferences and Institutes