

Essential Elements of Effective Practices for English Learners

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Abstract

One of the most powerful variables for English Learner success is the quality of their teachers. The lack of consistent and focused research-based professional development and preparation for teachers of English Learners (ELs) is a major contributing factor to the lack of adequate language and academic development. This policy brief (1) provides a synthesis of effective practices for instructing ELs; (2) presents four research-based essential elements critical for EL program implementation, teacher reflection, and monitoring of teacher effectiveness; and (3) concludes with program and policy recommendations. Three key areas for policy action are prioritized: 1) District and state level policies must require that local and state leadership support the implementation of these essential elements, and 2) Alignment of fiscal and human resources must be targeted to ensure that teachers are provided with professional development, materials and curricular program supports required to implement these key elements leading to English learner success. 3) Teacher preparation and credential requirements need to incorporate the four critical elements of effective practice for success with English Learners.

Four Essential Elements

Rigorous and Relevant Instructional Practices

Multiple Measures for EL Assessment

Assessing Practices of Teachers of ELs

Collaboration and Professional Development

In cooperation with:



The Center for Equity for English Learners



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Introduction

Teachers need preparation in both instruction and assessment in order to create change that will result in effective instruction for English Learners. While a number of policy and program factors underlie the success of schools that serve English Learner (EL) populations in K-12 schools, teachers remain at the core of academic success for ELs. Our school systems must be prepared to support teachers in order to change the effects of over ten years of highly-structured, narrowly-focused reading and math curricula that have negatively impacted EL success (e.g. push outs, drop outs, long-term ELs) (Olsen, 2010; Gándara & Rumberger, 2009). Many English Learners have been foreclosed from a comprehensive curriculum of high quality science, social science and the arts.

Credentialing requirements must equip teachers with essential elements of effective practice that leads to English Learner success. Teachers need specialized preparation and professional development to target and differentiate the language and academic needs of English Learners.

Current Policy and Practice

Currently, federal, state and local funding and programs (including Economic Impact Aid, Titles I, II and III of the No Child Left Behind Act) have not adequately funded or prioritized the professional development needs of teachers of English Learners. The state and federal accountability systems have generalized instruction and assessment measures without specific attention to the language and academic needs of English Learners. The current California credentialing requirements are too general, with few opportunities to develop expertise in working with culturally and linguistically diverse

populations. This brief presents specific elements of effective practice that need to be incorporated into all comprehensive teacher preparation and school reform efforts.

Essential Elements of Effective Practice

Four essential elements emerge from the review of effective practices in EL program implementation. They are delineated in the narrative below:

Rigorous and Relevant Instructional Practices, Multiple Measures for English Learner Assessment, Assessing Practices of Teachers of English Learners, and Collaboration and Professional Development.

These four key elements are defined from an assets-based perspective for culturally and linguistically diverse students and are designed to inform, influence, and support school leaders and policy makers as they:

- 1) consider effective practices that lead to student achievement
- 2) understand the sociocultural and language demands that are unique for meeting the needs of English Learners.
- 3) ensure that those who evaluate programs consider both the ways in which teachers concurrently accelerate language and content learning for their students (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008; Santamaria, 2009).

Teachers' understanding of the difference in EL performance on different learning tasks will help them develop differentiated lessons that incorporate language and content-based learning activities.

Element 1. Rigorous and Relevant Instructional Practices

Supporting the development of teachers' expertise with English Learners by using student's linguistic and cultural resources in differentiated ways can positively affect students' academic competencies in English and ultimately their overall academic achievement. Research indicates that instruction of ELs should be designed to maximize the development of English while also maximizing their development of core curricular knowledge and skills (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010; Lavadenz & Armas, 2008). Tomlinson (2001) stresses that the focus on the learning needs of each individual student is based on adaptations to what is taught (content), how it is taught (process), and evidence of student learning (products). It is essential within this process that there is value for students' home language and culture (Cummins, 2009), along with key features of Rigorous and Relevant Instructional Practices for ELs. These features include:

Bridging connections: Teachers use students' prior knowledge to ensure that instruction values educational and personal experiences. As such, the teacher enables students to make meaningful connections with what is being taught and what they already know. In differentiating instruction effectively for ELs, teachers should encourage students to actively transfer skills between their first language and English. (e.g. words that have the same roots in both languages oxygen, oxígeno).

Comprehensibility for learning: In addition to using visuals, graphic organizers, manipulatives, and teaching key vocabulary, there are several important practices designed to increase access to the content areas for ELs across language proficiency levels. The Center for Applied Linguistics (1998) suggests eleven ways teachers can monitor and adjust their own language use during instruction. Especially for beginning-level ELs, teachers can increase comprehensibility and access to a rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum by

providing cycles of input, clarifications and using questioning strategies, as well as support for native language development.

Classrooms Structured to Support Multiple Opportunities for Interaction: Flexible grouping of students and collaborative routines engage students in talking about content in relevant, meaningful and structured ways. These routines are scaffolds that promote student autonomy. From simple processes such as structured turn-taking, to individual roles/jobs or responsibilities in small group work, to varying partners with "bilingual buddies", students who actively participate in classroom discussions with others are more engaged in learning the content. Cooperative learning is a valuable instructional strategy for ELs because it enhances interactions among students by providing direction for language use at all proficiency levels. Cooperative learning also promotes the development of positive academic and social support systems for ELs, while preparing students for increasingly interactive environments, and allows teachers to manage large classes of students with diverse needs (Holt, 1993).

Student Academic Language Interactions: Structured and informal student interactions are part of developing communicative competence in students. Students need to be able to have time to talk, question, and use the discourse of various genres to gain competency in both English and the content area (Swain, 1986). As such, teachers should guide interactions to provide opportunities for students to gain competency in English by explicitly modeling the type of academic language required for specific genres, and provide structures that allow students to practice these, orally and in writing.

... Effective programs, curriculum and appropriate leadership need to be in place to ensure that teachers are prepared and supported in implementing research-based effective strategies and programming.

Element 2. Multiple Measures for English Learner Assessment

Principals and teachers who conduct frequent assessment of student progress in all areas of instruction, and who use the data to address academic needs of students were more likely to see success for their English Learners (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2006). Multiple forms of assessment, including authentic assessment, are central to the ability to differentiate instruction.

Portfolios, rubrics, and performance-based assessments are examples of authentic assessments and should be incorporated with standards-based assessments such as the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and the California Standard Tests (CSTs). All state standards based assessments need to demonstrate validity and reliability for use with English Learners. Effective teachers persist until they have evidence that students understand key content and are able to demonstrate key skills (Johnson, 2009). Essential to this success is providing time and space for teachers to work together with peers and principals in reviewing test data independently and collaboratively (Reeves, 2003; EdSource, Sept, 2007).

Assuring that valid and reliable assessments for English Learners are used is vital to the deliberation and decision making process. It is imperative that programs utilize assessments that differentiate language development from academic achievement. For example, ELs who have conceptual knowledge of math but are at the beginning proficiency level of English, should have the opportunity to demonstrate mathematical understanding in their native language.

Connecting assessment results to inform teaching practices is critically important for English Learners. Teachers' understanding of the difference in EL performance on different learning tasks will also help them develop differentiated lessons that incorporate language and content-based learning activities. An example of a tool that focuses on differentiated language and content lessons is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) developed by Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2000). More recently the California Department of Education (CDE) published a review and analysis of research evidence on improving educational outcomes for English Learners (CDE, 2010) that provides further support

for specific instructional strategies for English Learners. Finally, teachers, students, and parents need to know which standards are most important to learn and district leaders should help educators prioritize standards and modify curricula accordingly to maximize language development and academic achievement for English Learners (Lau Protocol, 2008, Lavadenz & Armas, 2010).

Element 3. Assessing Practices of Teachers of English Learners

There is general consensus in the educational community that multiple measures that are fair, valid and reliable should be used in determining teaching effectiveness (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Three recent publications highlight specific recommendations in this area, first, UCLA Center X's [Multiple Measures of Good Teaching](#) (Applegate & Beudet, 2011); [A Quality Teacher in Every Classroom](#) from the National Board Resource Center at Stanford University; and the 2010 California Council on Teacher Education policy brief, [Seeking Effective and Equitable Evaluation of California's Teachers](#). This research is consistent in noting that effective schools serving ELs assess teachers using both standards-based measures for individual student achievement along with classroom observation measures. One example of such an assessment is the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL). This classroom observation tool is a standards-aligned measure of teacher practices with ELs across different content areas. (California Standards for the Teaching Profession, CDE, 2009/1997 and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: English as a New Language, U.S. Department of Education, 2002) The results of such an assessment can be used to inform reflection, collaboration and professional development needs of teachers (Lavadenz & Armas, 2010).

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Element 4. Collaboration and Professional Development

When teachers of ELs have time to reflect and collaborate on their instructional practice and utilize assessments to inform instruction as part of an effective work team, they are more effective in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Borba, 2009). In addition, strong systems of classroom-based professional development for both teachers and leaders are needed to ensure that innovations are implemented well (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2006). The expert teacher is a knowledgeable professional who is accomplished in curriculum, linguistics, cross-cultural understanding, assessment and student advocacy. (Walqui, 2001; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000)

Given the national achievement gap between ELs and their native English speaking peers, observational assessment tools like the OPAL, used appropriately in supportive and guided professional development settings, can serve as a vehicle for examining dynamic teaching and learning situations in schools. These tools should support effective coaching to promote collegial dialogue that focuses teacher practice in each of the elements above.

Policy Recommendations

Defining the elements of Rigorous and Relevant Instructional Practices, Multiple Measures for English Learner Assessment, Assessing Practices of Teachers of English Learners, and Collaboration and Professional Development is only the first step in creating real change in schooling policies and practices that will ultimately facilitate teachers' abilities to enact them in a consistent and coherent manner. To date, there is no distinct guidance for districts and schools toward the use and operationalization of these elements into practice. Thus, we contend that there are three priorities that ensue from this policy brief:

1) Clear and Coherent Local and State-Level Policies: The need is clear for policy makers to better understand the complexity in evaluation of effective teaching to meet the needs of English Learners. First and foremost, effective programs, curriculum, assessments and appropriate leadership need to be in place to ensure that teachers are prepared and supported in

implementing English Learner research-based effective strategies and programming. Without clear policy and support in place to guide district and school leaders, any teacher evaluation will prove inadequate in ensuring the best models for teaching and learning for English Learners. All school reform efforts should have a laser-like focus on addressing the language and academic needs of English Learners.

2) Adequacy of School Resources:

To support clear and coherent policies, there also needs to be an allocation of resources that are adequate and realigned to ensure quality materials, programming and most importantly professional development for administrators and teachers that is research-based and focused on meeting the needs of English Learners.

3) Teacher Preparation and Credential Requirements:

The current California AB 2042 credential requirements need to incorporate the four critical elements of effective practice for success with English Learners. Teachers leaving credential preparation programs should be familiar with the research and implications for instruction to target language and academic development for the various English Learner student profiles.

The concluding implications identify the mechanisms that can support the policies and resources necessary for implementing the elements of effective practices identified in this policy brief. These educational practices are essential for the ultimate academic success of ELs. Any new teacher evaluation system must look at multiple measures that can demonstrate language and academic growth sensitive to English Learners' first and second language proficiency. Optimally, the four essential elements for effective practice work in unison to create both structural and procedural changes in schools so that the growing achievement gaps of ELs that we have witnessed for the past 50 years can be reversed.

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