

# Helping English Learners Rise to the Challenge of Complex Texts

The idea that secondary English language learner (ELL) students can master rigorous academic content quickly and deeply goes against much accepted wisdom in the field. But Aída Walqui and her colleagues have spent the past 14 years developing and helping educators implement an instructional approach with exactly that goal.

“Traditionally educators have believed that it takes seven years for ELL students to master the discourse, syntax, grammar, and other mechanics of English, and then, after that, they are ready to learn complex academic content,” says Walqui, Director of WestEd’s Teacher Professional Development program, which houses the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) initiative. “But middle school and high school ELL students don’t have the luxury of seven years to accomplish that—and our experience shows that, with expert support from their teachers, that much time is not needed.”

QTEL’s approach, Walqui says, works on the premise that students will rise to the challenge of rigorous subject matter if it sparks their interest, if they receive appropriate support, and if academic content and academic English language skills are taught simultaneously, as a single, integrated process. However, she adds, to master this instructional approach, many teachers need to make dramatic shifts in their beliefs and practices.


Over the past year, a unit of study illustrating the approach has been piloted in five urban school districts nationwide through a partnership between the Understanding Language (UL) initiative at Stanford University and the Teacher Professional Development Program at WestEd. UL has as its goal promoting the examination of why new understandings of language and instruction matter in an era of new, more rigorous standards. For field testing purposes, curriculum developers designed a five-week, Common Core State Standards–aligned English language arts unit on persuasive text and media messages, aimed at raising learning expectations and experiences for ELL students—and their non-ELL peers.

“Teachers were surprised and impressed with their students’ engagement with the content,” Walqui says, “and with the sophistication of their academic conversations. The experience changed teachers’ views of students’ capabilities.”

## **Building content knowledge and language skills in tandem**

The unit, “Persuasion across Time and Space: Analyzing and Producing Complex Texts,” targets middle school English learners who have reached an intermediate level of proficiency in English. It shows teachers how to help students build English language mastery in tandem with conceptual understanding of text. Instead of isolating discrete skills such as vocabulary development or grammar, the

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unit encourages teachers to invite students to engage in meaningful and purposeful exploration of historical and contemporary texts, and to integrate formal language skill building into the process.

Each lesson takes students gradually through similar types of texts, representing similar genres and conventions. The unit is designed thematically, so that, as students deepen and expand their understandings, each new lesson helps them build on prior concepts and skills. In the unit, Walqui points out, students develop their abilities to read, interpret, critically analyze, and create various kinds of persuasive texts, and, in the process, learn appropriate academic practices and the language required to express them.

The unit's designers looked to the three major types of text addressed by the reading and writing sections of the Common Core State Standards: narrative, argument, and informative/explanatory. They chose texts ranging from television commercials to Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and pivotal speeches from the Civil Rights Movement, and provided tools—such as Aristotle's explanation of how argumentation can appeal to the ethical (*ethos*), emotional (*pathos*), and logical (*logos*) reasoning of readers and listeners—that can help students evaluate the texts' arguments and claims. The goal of the unit is to build students' knowledge of historical and current events while supporting their growing independence in listening to, speaking, reading, and writing English for academic purposes.

In using the unit, rather than simplifying text or assuming that students can't identify themes in text, teachers learn how to differentiate instruction for ELL students and how to help them draw on their background knowledge and experiences to build new or deeper understandings of ideas in and beyond classroom texts. By progressing from analysis of more familiar ideas and formats to analyzing unfamiliar content and text structures, teachers gradually enable students to explore complex texts in a purposeful way.


Six school districts affiliated with the Council of the Great City Schools field tested the unit during the past year, and teachers in several other large districts have reviewed and critiqued the unit. Feedback from participating schools indicates that the unit changed teachers' beliefs about what ELL students were capable of achieving.

One teacher recalled that it was rewarding "watching one of my students struggling, but nevertheless having a tremendous discussion, very high level, about something that was meaningful to him." "I was surprised at the level of questioning and the conversations that students engaged in," another teacher shared with WestEd researchers. "Toward the second and third lessons, it was very simple for them to jump into conversation [on the theme assigned]—just to start talking." "It was impressive to hear them," a third teacher observed. "To be honest, I didn't think they would be able to talk about *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. But they did get it; they understood the complex ideas and processes."

"I liked the questions my students asked and the deep discussions they had, without me prompting them," said another teacher. "They are learning that there is another way of learning."

### **Apprenticing students as analytical readers**

The unit emphasizes the apprenticeship model of learning, in which students participate in guided academic practices deliberately designed to provide opportunities for students to become autonomous experts over time. When teachers offer various levels of



support, or scaffolding, tailored to each student's needs, students progressively develop their ability to work independently. As they move from informal and collaborative group settings to formal group and individual presentations, students practice and gain confidence as they learn to articulate ideas, interpret information, and present and defend claims. Assessments, such as peer editing with clearly defined rubrics or finding textual evidence to support conclusions, are also designed to build students' autonomy as purposeful readers and writers over time.

One student commented that "in this unit, we used a lot of charts to lay out our ideas in organized ways. They would ask us questions and we would realize, 'Oh, this is a technique [former Texas Congresswoman Barbara] Jordan used, and so did Martin Luther King,' and we would connect different ideas." Another student described the unit as "more challenging," compared to previous learning experiences, because, instead of offering "fun activities," teachers made the lessons both engaging and demanding, signaling their high expectations for students' performance.

If one student doesn't initially grasp a strategy or idea, other students can step in to help. "We have the benefit that most of us here speak two languages, English and Spanish," a student shared with researchers. "There were some challenging parts, but being bilingual, there is the benefit that, if someone understands it and they can't fully explain it in English, then speaking in the other language, everybody can understand [their ideas]."

### **Needed: "Sustained, powerful professional development"**

The unit is available online for teachers to use as is or adapt to their needs, with downloadable materials for both teachers and students. Walqui says that the unit team plans to post comments from students and teachers online and to share video clips from classrooms, as well as students' work samples obtained during implementation. The team also plans to share additional implementation research based on pilot sites, webinars, and extension activities.

Walqui cautions that schools and school districts must give teachers time to explore and experiment with the recommended practices for ELL students, preferably through sustained professional development and professional learning communities. "Sustained, powerful professional development is needed," she says. "If we want our teachers to invite students to learn in dramatically different ways, we need to invite the teachers themselves to engage in dramatically different ways of learning. Such learning must weave theory and pedagogical practice together so that teachers know how to deliver instruction purposefully, based on understanding why and how effective practice works."

One of the key lessons learned from implementation of the unit, she observes, is that, although teachers can readily add productive activities to their instructional repertoire as a result of this training, more than just a few hours of professional development are needed to make deep and coherent changes to long-held instructional beliefs and practices.

For more information about QTEL or the "Persuasion across Time and Space" unit, contact Aída Walqui at [awalqui@wested.org](mailto:awalqui@wested.org) or 415.615.3262. Copies of the unit are available on the Understanding Language initiative's website at [http://ell.stanford.edu/teaching\\_resources/ela](http://ell.stanford.edu/teaching_resources/ela)