Educating English Language Learners

A Review of the Latest Research

By Diane August

I t's October in the Rio Grande Valley; the summer heat has receded and the school year is in full swing. Rolando Diaz teaches sixth-grade science at Del Valle Middle School. His class is a mix of English language learners (ELLs) with varying levels of English proficiency. He also has a few newcomer students, mostly from Mexico and Central America. Although all the students are Latino, they have varying degrees of Spanish proficiency.

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Today, Mr. Diaz is teaching a lesson on ecology. To prepare for it, he has added several scaffolds to the district-mandated science curriculum. He presents slides to guide the lesson, providing students with visual support for what they hear him say.

Students also have a workbook that corresponds to the slides. For each slide, students engage in an activity that helps them process information. In this case, it is "partner talk" requiring them to describe a variety of habitats in terms of food, shelter, and temperature. They also use a bilingual glossary with pictures and English and Spanish definitions for the lesson's target vocabulary words. The glossary asks students to answer a question about each word and draw a picture or provide an example. For instance, for "ecosystem," they describe one near their house.

Mr. Diaz begins the lesson by introducing the content and language objectives for the day. Next, he explains several general and domain-specific words using the slides.

He quickly gives each definition in English, asks a student to read the definition in Spanish, presents an example for each definition, and asks students to discuss each word's meaning. A few

weeks ago, he taught a mini-lesson on recognizing English-Spanish cognates, so they discuss whether "habitat" and "ecosystem" are also cognates.

Students then form groups to explore the schoolyard habitat. In each group, students are assigned various roles—mapmaker, bug collector, vegetation inspector, soil sampler, or data collector—and they complete a corresponding chart. For example, the vegetation inspector measures and records the height of the tallest vegetation and works with the mapmaker to record the location.

At the end of the lesson, students listen and follow along as Mr. Diaz reads the section of the grade-level text that discusses features of the ecosystem in Yellowstone National Park. After each section of text, students answer questions orally about the text, illustrations, and other visual displays. Mr. Diaz provides sentence starters and sentence frames to scaffold responses for his students with lower levels of English proficiency.* He intentionally pairs newcomers with bilingual peers so they can converse in Spanish before writing in English.

A longtime teacher, Mr. Diaz has effectively planned and carried out instruction on a specific science topic. He has ensured that students with varying degrees of English proficiency can access the academic content, strengthen their literacy skills, and engage with and learn from their peers.

I've worked with Mr. Diaz and many others like him to incorporate these best practices into their teaching. His teaching reflects the latest research on educating ELLs. In this article, I discuss this research, which includes seven principles from a recent consensus report released by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.[1] The report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, examines what the research tells us about learning English from early childhood through high school, identifies effective practices for educators, and recommends steps policymakers can take to support high-quality educational outcomes for children and youth who are learning English.

These principles and practices build on findings from previous reviews on the same topic,[2] as well as U.S. Department of Education best-evidence syntheses.[3] While dual language programming for ELLs is effective for developing English proficiency and content-area knowledge in English—with the extra benefit of maintaining and developing students' first language, validating their culture, and providing opportunities to enhance cross-cultural understanding[4]—this article focuses on instruction delivered in English, an important component of dual language programs. (For more on dual language programs and early childhood education, see the article on page 10.)

1. Provide Access to Grade-Level Course Content

For ELLs, exposure to grade-level course content provides crucial access to the language required for academic achievement and for becoming fully proficient in English.[5] This exposure helps
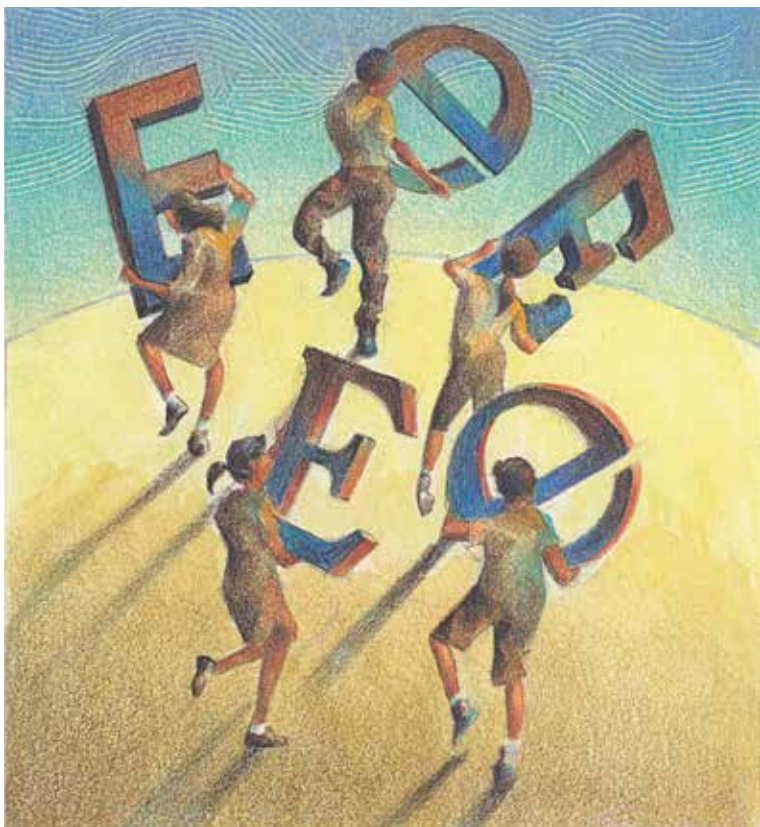
*For more on scaffolding, see "One Sentence at a Time" in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2017/hochman-wexler.

> **Keep in mind that many skills and types of knowledge transfer from students' first language to their second.**

students develop the concepts and skills needed to master grade-level coursework as they move up through the grades. Grade-level coursework, in turn, helps ensure students perceive the materials as worth working on, engaging, and meaningful.[6]

In the reviewed studies that focus on the elementary grade levels, a variety of authentic materials were used to support learning. For example, in an English language arts intervention, newspaper articles, diaries, and historical and fictional accounts were used to teach students about immigration across different time periods.[7] In an intervention for young children, the read-aloud books and videos focused on habitats.[8] A middle-grades science intervention used the same texts and experiments used with gifted and talented students.[9]

It is important to keep in mind that many skills and types of knowledge transfer from students' first language to their second, and that ELLs may have already acquired core content in their first language.[10] For example, students who have learned math concepts and skills in their first language do not need to relearn the concepts and skills, but do need to learn the English academic language associated with them. ELLs whose first language shares cognates with English do not need to learn meanings for cognates whose meanings they know in their first language—only English labels for these cognates.

tions, it is helpful to teach ELLs the same skills as their English-proficient peers—the skills of hearing the individual English sounds or phonemes within words (i.e., phonemic awareness); using the letters and spelling patterns within words to decode the pronunciation (i.e., phonics); reading text aloud with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression (i.e., oral reading fluency); using strategies to learn new words; thinking about what they are reading (i.e., reading comprehension); and writing with the organization, development, substance, and style appropriate to the task and audience.[11]

Effective practices for middle-grades students similarly build on practices that have been effective with English-proficient students. For example, in science, the 5-E approach—Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate—has been used to guide successful interventions for ELLs.[12] Approaches deemed effective for building vocabulary in English-proficient students have also been used in successful interventions for ELLs.[13] Examples include teaching vocabulary in the context of rich and varied language experiences, teaching individual words, teaching word-learning strategies, promoting word consciousness, and using words in writing.[14] In social studies, approaches include reading and writing about informational passages that provide multiple perspectives on historical events.[15]

That said, not *all* practices deemed effective for English-proficient learners are effective for ELLs. For example, one study[16] found that the use of literacy practices that included only higher-level questioning and discussion about the meaning of text had a strong relationship to improved reading comprehension for English-proficient students, but had little discernible benefit for ELLs. The study also found differences with respect to teacher–student interactions. "Telling"—defined as the teacher providing students with information, rather than engaging them in the creation of information through coaching, recitation, or other forms of interaction—had a statistically significant positive effect on ELLs' reading comprehension, but a negative effect on the comprehension of English-proficient students. The researcher posits that in the first case, the literacy practices (e.g., higher-level questioning and discussion) may have been at too high a level for ELLs to benefit without the appropriate supports. In the case of "telling," the researcher suggests that ELLs benefited because they were provided with more support for engaging with core content in English—a level of support that was not necessary for English-proficient students.

Approaches deemed effective for building vocabulary in English-proficient students have also been used in successful interventions for ELLs.

Because grade-level materials in English are challenging for ELLs, instruction using these materials must be coupled with methods that support ELLs. The following principles elaborate on this theme.

2. Build on Effective Practices Used with English-Proficient Students

Many of the practices that have proved effective for ELLs are adapted from practices that have proved effective for English-proficient students.* For example, in the area of literacy interven-

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*A useful resource for finding reading and math programs deemed effective for all students is www.evidenceforessa.org, a website created by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University.

3. Provide Supports to Help ELLs Master Core Content and Skills

ELLs also benefit from visual and verbal supports.[17] For students in the elementary grades, visual supports include the strategic use of pictures, short videos, and graphic organizers to represent complex vocabulary and concepts.[18] Verbal supports include student glossaries; words glossed in context by the teacher; and whole-class, small-group, and partner discussions that focus in part on clarifying key ideas.[19] In the middle grades, visual supports

include graphic organizers such as diagrams, tables, and concept maps for science, and illustrations and multimedia for language arts. Verbal supports include bilingual glossaries, as well as sentence and paragraph frames. In several studies, students were taught strategies to support learning;[20] in one such study, students learned strategies to help them write.[21]

For ELLs who are newcomers, especially those in the upper grades, core content provided in their home language will support them in developing their knowledge and skills while they are acquiring proficiency in English.

4. Develop ELLs' Academic Language

Academic language is defined as language used in school, in written communications, in public presentations, and in formal settings.[22] Academic proficiency is "knowing and being able to use general and academic vocabulary, specialized or complex grammatical structures, and multifarious language functions and discourse structures—all for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills, interacting about a topic, and imparting information to others."[23]

It is important to note that academic language differs across content areas. In science, for example, the challenges of mastering academic language apply to vocabulary (e.g., learning everyday words with science meanings, general academic vocabulary, and discipline-specific vocabulary); syntax (e.g., passive voice, compound and complex sentences, and the nominalization[†] of verbs, adverbs, and adjectives); and discourse (e.g., learning to attend to precise meanings in science text and talk). Students must also learn to master the nonlinguistic forms of language prevalent in content areas like science and math (e.g., diagrams, graphs, charts, maps, and equations).[24]

One series of experimental studies developed academic language in the context of teaching mainly science content.[25] The studies used the types of visual and verbal supports previously described to help students make sense of content, develop general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, engage in opportunities to talk in pairs and small groups, and practice writing to extend their learning. These studies are well reviewed in two U.S. Department of Education practice guides for educators.[26]

With regard to vocabulary instruction, recent research indicates embedded instruction is a promising technique for developing ELLs' vocabulary when that vocabulary is not conceptually complex.[27] In embedded instruction, students are given access to word meanings through on-the-spot child-friendly definitions of the target words (and, in some cases, examples and gestures). The research also indicates that instructional condition interacts with word type, with conceptually complex words much harder for students to acquire and thus needing more instructional support.[28] (For more on helping stu-

dents with their oral language development, see the article on page 18.)

5. Encourage Peer-to-Peer Learning Opportunities

One of the key principles of instruction in a second language is enabling students to interact via speaking, listening, reading, and writing with peers in their second language.[29] Speaking is important to generate feedback, encourage syntactic processing, and challenge students to engage at higher proficiency levels. As a result, it is no surprise that in many of the studies cited thus far, peer-to-peer learning was an important component of the intervention. In fact, in some studies, it was the focus.

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For example, in one study implemented in the elementary grades, peer-to-peer learning was used to develop first-graders' literacy skills in a dual language program.[30] Using the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) program, the peer-to-peer learning classrooms provided a structured routine in which the teacher modeled the language activities of the day; students practiced the activities in pairs for 15 minutes while the teacher supervised; and students then turned to story sharing, a partner reading activity that lasted for another 15 minutes. Teachers paired high-performing readers with low-performing readers and

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[†]Nominalization refers to using a word that is not a noun (e.g., a verb, adjective, or adverb) as a noun or as the head of a noun phrase (e.g., using the adjective "rich" as a noun, as in "the rich").

then taught the students to use the PALS procedures. During each segment of the session, the high-performing students performed the role of coach first, and the low-performing students followed. On average, PALS students demonstrated significantly greater growth than control students in phoneme segmentation, nonsense word fluency, and oral reading fluency.

Historically, ELLs have been both overidentified and underidentified as having a disability.

In the middle grades, many of the interventions that had positive outcomes for ELLs also provided opportunities for collaborative peer learning.[31] An important feature of these studies is that peer talk, in pairs or small groups, focused on course content.

In planning for peer-to-peer interactions for adolescents, teachers need to consider students' growing awareness of their social status in peer groups in school and their community.[32] For ELLs, this includes how they are perceived by peers proficient in English.[33]

6. Capitalize on Students' Home Language, Knowledge, and Cultural Assets

Studies on cross-language transfer[34] indicate significant relationships between performance in ELLs' first and second languages in word reading, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension, and reading strategies. Findings from evaluation studies comparing bilin-

gual programs with mostly English-only programs indicate that, over time, ELLs instructed bilingually either perform on par with or outperform ELLs instructed only in English,[35] providing indirect evidence of positive transfer.

Experimental studies[36] conducted with elementary school children suggest that instructional routines that draw on students' home language, knowledge, and cultural assets support literacy development in English.* Examples of the instructional routines include previewing and reviewing material in children's first language, storybook reading in students' first language,[37] providing opportunities for students to engage in conversational exchanges during instruction that permits some interpretation to take place in their first language,[38] providing first-language definitions for the targeted vocabulary,[39] providing instruction in word-learning strategies that help ELLs uncover the meanings of cognates when encountered in English texts,[40] and introducing key concepts by connecting them with children's prior knowledge or experiences at home and in their community.[41]

As was the case for studies conducted with children in grades K–5, middle-grades studies that showed positive effects capitalized on ELLs' assets. While none of the studies were implemented in bilingual settings, the interventions included bilingual glossaries, background materials in students' home languages, teacher explanations in students' home languages, partner work in students' home languages, and instruction to help ELLs take advantage of their home-language knowledge and skills.[42]

7. Screen for Language and Literacy Challenges, Monitor Progress, and Support ELLs Who Are Struggling

Historically, ELLs have been both overidentified and underidentified as having a disability.[43] Both cases—identifying students as having a disability when they do not in fact have one (i.e., overidentification) and failing to identify students for special education services that they need (i.e., underidentification)—are problematic. Measures used to assess ELLs for reading and language challenges must distinguish language development from disability.

Most intervention research has focused on ELLs with reading difficulties. Findings from numerous studies cited in previous reviews of promising and effective instructional practices for ELLs[44] suggest that districts should establish procedures and provide training for schools to screen ELLs for reading challenges, consider collecting progress monitoring data more than three times a year for ELLs at risk, and use data from screening and progress monitoring assessments to make decisions about necessary instructional supports.

The studies also suggest the types of reading skills that should be assessed at different grade spans to determine whether ELLs

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*For more on ways English language learners bring cultural assets to schools, see "The Potential and Promise of Latino Students" in the Spring 2017 issue of *American Educator,* available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2017/gandara.

are in need of additional instructional support. For kindergarten and first grade, skills include phonological awareness, familiarity with the alphabet and alphabetic principle, the ability to read single words, and knowledge of basic phonics rules. For children at the end of first grade and in the next few grades, skills include the ability to read connected texts accurately and fluently. For students in grades 2–5, oral reading fluency should also be assessed. However, these grade spans are predicated on ELLs beginning their schooling in kindergarten and must be adjusted for students entering U.S. schools in later grades and who may have already acquired these skills in their first language.
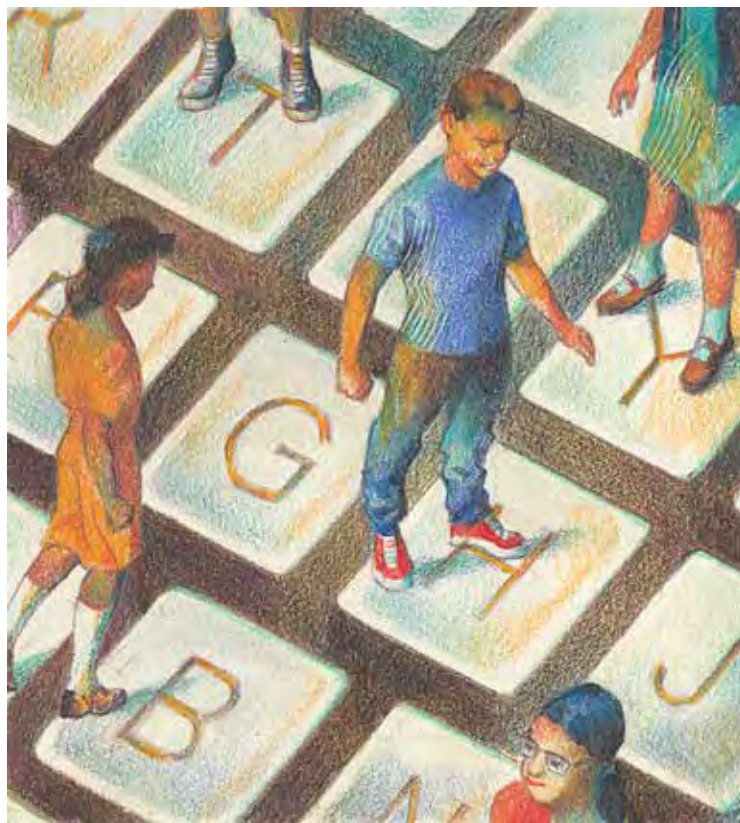
The studies provide two other recommendations: first, districts with performance benchmarks should use the same standards for ELLs and English-proficient students in the early grades, but should make adjustments in instruction when ELL progress is not sufficient; and second, teachers should be trained to use formative data to guide instruction.[45] With regard to formative data, one study suggests that students' writing samples should be used on an ongoing basis to determine areas for improvement.[46] Students' writing samples are excellent sources for formative assessment because they shed light on language challenges common to all children, as well as challenges and opportunities related to primary language influence on English.[47]

Almost all studies related to screening, monitoring, and intervening are studies of ELLs in elementary grades.[48] Recommendations based on these studies include implementing intensive small-group interventions for at least 30 minutes in small homogeneous groups, and providing training and ongoing support for teachers, interventionists, and other school personnel on how to deliver small-group instruction effectively, as well as how to implement effective teaching techniques that can be used outside small-group instruction (e.g., instructional pacing, error corrections, and modeling).[49] Another important recommendation is that additional supports should be provided to ELLs struggling in English literacy that address the other skills crucial for success in school, such as vocabulary, listening, reading comprehension, and writing.[50]

Students' writing samples shed light on language challenges as well as opportunities related to primary language influence on English.

Where Additional Research Would Help

While there are some studies on effective practices for ELLs in science, studies focused on math and social studies are still very limited, compared with studies of English-proficient students. More research is also needed on promising and effective teaching methods for developing ELLs' home language, knowledge, and skills, and equalizing the social status of students from different ethnic/language backgrounds with the social status of white and native English-speaking students in schools.

For bilingual programs in particular, research is needed on the features that influence the successful acquisition of language and content. These features should include student ratios of English speakers to partner-language speakers in two-way programs, the number of instructional hours allotted to each language, the pro-

portion of school staff and leadership who are bilingual, and the use of target languages within and across content areas.[51] And since most of the intervention research focuses on ELLs in grades K–2, and on pre-reading and reading skills, additional research is needed to understand how to intervene with older ELLs struggling in reading and with ELLs at all grade levels struggling in math, science, and social studies.

Finally, the social and emotional factors that influence student dispositions toward learning and academic performance (e.g., student motivation and engagement) must also be studied. More effective instruction, positive teacher attitudes toward teaching ELLs and high expectations that they can succeed, and engaging

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school climates can foster ELLs' motivation to learn and commitment to their educational success in the elementary school years and beyond.[52]

Experienced teachers knowledgeable about supporting ELLs, such as Mr. Diaz, already incorporate many of these principles in their instruction. But more needs to be done to make sure this research gets into the hands of all classroom teachers, and to ensure additional research is conducted that can strengthen teaching and learning. □

Endnotes

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Oral Language

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want to produce individuals who are thoughtful, engaged, and conscious of their own development.

English language learners bring valuable assets and immense potential to school. The role of educators is to realize that potential in deep and accelerated ways. Each classroom teacher must ensure the path to that development is paved with meaningful interactions to help students develop language skills, gain conceptual understanding, and learn academic content. Our students deserve no less. ☐

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