



Some Facts About the ELL Population

It is hard to find a school or district in this country that doesn't have an English learner population. For teachers in states like California, Texas, Florida, and New York it is sometimes hard to find a classroom without any English language learners. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that approximately 4.5 million English learners are enrolled in public schools across the country—roughly 10 percent of all students enrolled in K–12 schools in the United States.⁴ The number of English learners has increased by over 50 percent in the last decade, with some states, like South Carolina and Indiana, experiencing extremely rapid growth of English learner populations (400 to 800 percent increases).⁵ The ELL population continues to grow, with some demographers predicting that in twenty years the ratio of ELL students to English-only students could be one in four.⁶

While English learners in this country come from over four hundred different language backgrounds, the majority (80 percent) of the ELL population enrolled in our nation's schools are Spanish speakers.⁷ Vietnamese and Chinese are the next two most common first languages spoken among ELLs (accounting for 1.8 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively, of the ELL population).⁸

ELL, ESL, ELD, LEP, EFL: WHAT DO ALL THE LABELS MEAN?

ELL, or English language learner. ELL is the most current term used in the United States to describe students whose native language is not English, who are in various stages of acquiring English, and who require various levels of language support and development in order to become fully proficient in English.

ESL, or English as a second language. The term *ESL* was formerly used as a designation for ELL students, but is more commonly used now to refer to “a program of instruction designed to support ELL students” and is often still used at the postsecondary level to refer to multilingual students.⁹

ELD, or English language development. ELD is often used to describe instruction and programs for ELL students that focus on developing English language proficiency in the domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

LEP, or limited English proficiency. *LEP* is used by the U.S. Department of Education for ELLs who have not yet demonstrated proficiency in English, according to state standards and assessments.¹⁰

EFL, or English as a foreign language. EFL refers to students who are “nonnative English speakers, but who are learning English in a country where English is not the primary language.”¹¹



Many educators and researchers, including the authors of this book, prefer the term *ELL* because it emphasizes that students are active *learners* of English, as opposed to being limited or deficient in some way.

ADOLESCENT ELLS AND LONG-TERM ELLS

Adolescent ELL students are a fast-growing population and come from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. ELLs in grades seven through twelve increased by approximately 70 percent between 1992 and 2002.¹²

From 9 to 20 percent of students enrolled in middle and high schools are newcomer or refugee students. While some of these students come with high literacy skills and content knowledge, the majority of newcomers are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) who have had two or more years of interrupted schooling in their home country.¹³ These students enter U.S. schools with limited educational experiences and lower levels of literacy in their native languages.

Well over half of ELLs in middle and high schools were born in the United States, are second- or even third-generation immigrants, and have been enrolled in U.S. schools since kindergarten.¹⁴ Researchers have identified these students as long-term English language learners, or LT-ELLs. Typically, these students have high levels of oral English proficiency, but may lack the academic language and skills in reading and writing needed to master subject matter.¹⁵ Many long-term ELLs are stuck at the intermediate level due to their lack of proficiency in academic language and their challenges with reading and writing skills. Many of these students may not have received targeted language development, may have been placed with teachers lacking the professional development needed to meet specific language needs, and may have lived in particularly challenging socioeconomic conditions, including poverty.¹⁶

With such diversity among adolescent ELLs, it is important for teachers to learn as much as possible about their students and to have knowledge of strategies that directly address the needs of these students. Chapter Two contains ideas for getting to know students and for building relationships of trust with students and their families. It also outlines important resources for working with adolescent ELLs and gives ideas for establishing classroom routines that promote a positive learning environment. Chapters Three and Four present instructional strategies designed for newcomer and beginning students, and Chapters Five and Six offer numerous strategies designed for intermediate-level learners, including long-term ELLs.

While adolescent learners enter our classrooms with diverse needs and challenges, it is important to remember that adolescents also bring creative minds capable of processing higher-order thinking and learning. The general public may often have the impression that language learning is easiest for young children and becomes harder and harder with age. However, recent research has shown that some elements of language acquisition may actually be easier for adolescents than for young

children. One study found that young adults who were taught a specific language rule were better than younger children at “recognizing the rule, applying it quickly, and using it in new situations.”¹⁷

A Primer on ESL Research

The following subsections present basic descriptions of research and concepts that are foundational components of ESL instruction. While this is not a comprehensive summary of all the research on language development, it is an introduction to several key concepts that are highly important for teachers of ELLs and can serve as launching points for further study.

L1 AND L2

Researchers and educators commonly use the term *L1* to refer to a student’s native language (also called primary language, home language, or heritage language) and *L2* to refer to the language a student is acquiring in addition to their native language, which in the United States is English. The next subsection, on ESL best practices, will discuss the important link between L1 and L2 in language learning.

BICS AND CALP

Jim Cummins, a professor at the University of Toronto, first introduced the distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills, or BICS, and cognitive academic language proficiency, or CALP,¹⁸ and his research has had a major impact on both policy and practices in second language education.

Basically, BICS, also called *communicative competence*, refer to the listening and speaking skills that students tend to acquire quickly in a new language (within the first couple of years) in order to communicate in social situations. For example, BICS enable one to talk with friends on the soccer field or to ask someone for directions.

CALP refers to the academic language and more cognitively demanding skills that are required for academic success. CALP takes longer for students to develop, often between five to seven years, but can take longer for students with less proficiency in their native language.¹⁹ CALP is required in academic situations such as lectures, class discussions, and research projects, and includes skills such as summarizing, analyzing, extracting and interpreting meaning, evaluating evidence, composing, and editing.²⁰

More recent research has extended CALP to include the following three dimensions of academic English: linguistic (knowledge of word forms, functions, grammatical elements, and discourse patterns used in academic settings), cognitive (higher-order thinking involved in academic settings), and

sociocultural-psychological (knowledge of social practices involved in academic settings).²¹ ESL instruction based on CALP is still widely accepted as best practice,²² as many researchers agree upon the need to focus on academic language proficiency in order for English learners to succeed in school.

ACQUISITION VERSUS LEARNING

Most researchers acknowledge a distinction between language acquisition and language learning. A simple, rudimentary explanation of the difference is that acquisition involves being able to easily use the language to communicate, while language learning might place more emphasis on filling out grammar worksheets correctly. This does not mean, however, that the two are mutually exclusive.

This distinction has led to much debate over the place of explicit grammar study in language development. Some linguists have argued for a more communicative approach, where the focus is on the message versus the form and fosters language acquisition, while others believe students need direct instruction in grammatical forms of the target language.²³

Recent research has proposed a more balanced approach—that second language instruction can provide a combination of both *explicit* teaching focused on features of the second language such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and *implicit* learning stemming from meaningful communication in the second language.²⁴ We agree that the best language instruction uses meaningful input and contexts to help students develop their English skills, but we also feel that teaching language features in context is also necessary for students to develop proficiency. Specific strategies for how to employ this kind of balanced approach in the classroom will be described in later chapters.

STAGES OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

While it is important to note that ELL students come with different cultural and educational experiences that can affect their language development, researchers, beginning with Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell,²⁵ have identified the following *general* stages of second language acquisition that students go through:

Preproduction. Also called the “silent period,” when the student is taking in the target language, but not speaking it.

Early production. The student begins to try speaking using short phrases, but the focus is still on listening and absorbing the new language. Many errors occur in this stage.

Speech emergent. Words and sentences are longer, but the student still relies heavily on context clues and familiar topics. Vocabulary increases and errors decrease, especially in common or repeated interactions.

Beginning fluency. In social situations, speech is fairly fluent with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging due to gaps in vocabulary.

Intermediate fluency. Communicating in the second language is fluent, especially in social language situations. In new situations or in academic areas, speech is approaching fluency, but some gaps in vocabulary knowledge still exist. There are very few errors, and the student is able to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills (such as opinions and analysis) in the second language.

Advanced fluency. Student communicates fluently in all contexts and can maneuver successfully in new contexts and when exposed to new academic information. The student may still have an accent and use idiomatic expressions incorrectly at times, but is essentially fluent and comfortable communicating in the second language.²⁶

It is important to remember that not all students' experiences fall neatly into these categories, and that prior educational experiences and literacy in their L1 can have a great impact on students' language acquisition processes. Most researchers believe it takes from five to seven years to reach advanced fluency if a student has strong first language and literacy skills, and that it can take between seven to ten years for students with less language proficiency in their first language.²⁷

Knowing students' proficiency levels can help teachers differentiate their instruction and address the language needs of each student. For example, when working with students in preproduction and early production stages, it can be helpful to ask yes-or-no questions. Students at the speech emergent level could be asked questions that require a fairly short, literal answer, and students at the beginning fluency stage could be asked if they agree or disagree with a statement and why.

PROFICIENCY LEVELS

As described earlier, research has found that ELLs progress through several stages of language acquisition. Most states use a model that divides this process into five levels of English proficiency: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, and advanced.

Researchers have also found that students generally progress much more quickly from beginning to intermediate level (often taking two to three years) than from intermediate to advanced (often taking four or more years). This is likely because the lower levels of proficiency require simpler vocabulary and sentence patterns and involve language situations that are highly contextualized (familiar, recurrent, and supported by nonlinguistic clues such as gestures and intonation). Full proficiency, on the other hand, means students must have command of more complex sentence

structures and vocabulary. They must have the academic English to function well in less contextualized situations (for example, a classroom discussion or a prompted essay), where they must clearly communicate their ideas on higher-level, more abstract concepts.

This research directly contradicts the argument that students who are immersed in all-English instruction will quickly become fluent, and it challenges the policies proposed and implemented in some states requiring students to move into mainstream classes after just one year of school.²⁸

A Quick Tour of ESL Best Practices

Throughout this book we will describe many effective instructional strategies and activities to use with ELL students. The following are a few basic best practices in ESL instruction that will guide the strategies and activities presented in the following chapters. We have found that consistently using these practices makes our lessons more efficient and effective. We also feel it is important to include a few “worst” practices we have witnessed over the years in the hopes that they will not be repeated! The best practices outlined below, as well as others, will be explained in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

MODELING

Do. Model for students what they are expected to do or produce, especially for new skills or activities, by explaining and demonstrating the learning actions, sharing your thinking processes aloud, and showing samples of good teacher and student work. Modeling promotes learning and motivation by developing student self-confidence. It helps them “believe that they, too, will be successful if they follow the same behavioral sequence.”²⁹ Modeling (or demonstrating) is one way for teachers to provide students with “critical input” in order to help students process content more “deeply and comprehensively.”³⁰

Don't. Just tell students what to do and expect them to do it.

RATE OF SPEECH AND WAIT TIME

Do. Speak slowly and clearly and provide students with enough time to formulate their responses, whether in speaking or in writing. Remember—they are thinking and producing in two or more languages! After asking a question, wait for a few seconds before calling on someone to respond. This wait time provides all students with an opportunity to think and process, and gives ELLs an especially needed period to formulate a response.³¹

Don't. Speak too fast, and if a student tells you they didn't understand what you said, never, ever repeat the same thing in a louder voice!

USE OF NONLINGUISTIC CUES

Do. Use visuals, sketches, gestures, intonation, and other nonverbal cues to make both language and content more accessible to students. Teaching with visual representations of concepts can be hugely helpful to ELLs.³² Specific suggestions are included throughout this book.

Don't. Stand in front of the class and lecture or rely on a textbook as your only “visual aid.”

GIVING INSTRUCTIONS

Do. Give verbal *and* written instructions—this practice can help all learners, especially ELLs. In addition, it is far easier for a teacher to point to the board in response to the inevitable repeated question, “What are we supposed to do?”³³

Don't. Act surprised if students are lost when you haven't clearly written and explained step-by-step directions.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Do. Regularly check that students are understanding the lesson. After an explanation or lesson, a teacher could say, “Please put thumbs up, thumbs down, or sideways to let me know if this is clear, *and it's perfectly fine if you don't understand or are unsure—I just need to know.*” This last phrase is essential if you want students to respond honestly. Teachers can also have students quickly answer on a sticky note that they place on their desks. The teacher can then quickly circulate to check responses.

When teachers regularly check for understanding in the classroom, students become increasingly aware of monitoring their own understanding, which serves as a model of good study skills. It also helps ensure that students are learning, thinking, understanding, comprehending, and processing at high levels.³⁴

Don't. Simply ask “Are there any questions?” This is not an effective way to gauge what all your students are thinking. Waiting until the end of class to see what people write in their learning log is not going to provide timely feedback. Also, don't assume that students are understanding because they are smiling and nodding their heads—sometimes they are just being polite!

ENCOURAGE DEVELOPMENT OF L1

Do. Encourage students to continue building their literacy skills in their L1. Research has found that learning to read in the home language promotes reading achievement in the second language as “transfer” occurs. These transfers may include phonological awareness, comprehension skills, and background knowledge.³⁵ It is also recommended as a best practice that teachers validate students’ primary languages and encourage them to continue reading and writing in their L1.³⁶

While the research on transfer of L1 skills to L2 cannot be denied, it doesn’t mean that we should not encourage the use of English in class and outside of the classroom. For ideas on how to balance the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom, see the section on primary language use in the ESL classroom in Chapter Twelve.

Don’t. “Ban” students’ use of their native language in the classroom. Forbidding students from using their primary languages does not promote a positive learning environment where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes. This practice can be harmful to the relationships between teachers and students, especially if teachers act more like language “police” than language “coaches.”

We hope you will keep this big picture of ESL demographics, research, and best practices in mind as you explore the rest of this book and as you teach in your classroom.



Additional resources, including ones on current ESL research and instructional strategies by proficiency level, can be found on our book’s web site at www.josseybass.com/go/eslsurvivalguide.