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Who Are Standard English Learners (SELs)?

Throughout the United States the dialogue centered on students for whom English is not native has traditionally revolved around immigrant populations. Standard English Learners (SELs), a language minority group that includes African American, American Indian, Mexican American, and Hawaiian American students for whom Standard English is not native, represent a population of language different students whose educational needs are often overlooked and are not addressed in federal and state educational policy or school districts' master plans for English Learners. Yet, the educational statistics of Standard English Learners (SELs) are among the most disconsolate for language different student populations.

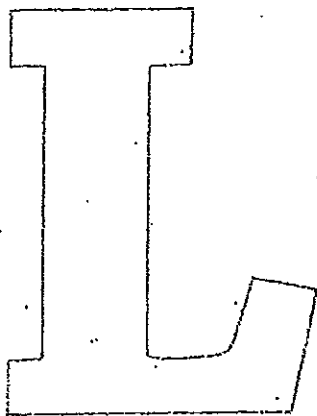
Standard English Learners come from home environments that reflect a unique language and cultural history. They are descendants of indigenous speakers of African, American Indian, Hawaiian, and Latin American Spanish languages respectively and none of them are indigenous speakers of English. These "involuntary minority" groups learned English, in many instances, without the benefit of school. They

African American, Hawaiian American, Mexican American, and Native American Standard English Learners (SELs) who bring language differences to the classroom, may not get the same benefits from traditional approaches to instruction as other students.

combined their intuitive knowledge of their indigenous language structures with newly acquired English vocabulary and created new languages that proved quite functional in their new surroundings. These languages, African American Language or what has been called Black English, American Indian Language or Red English,

Hawaiian American Language also referred to as Hawaiian Pidgin English and Mexican American language commonly referred to as Chicano English, represent the linguistic competence of the descendants of Africans, Indians, Hawaiians, and generational Mexicans in America.





Advancing Language and Learning in Standard English Learners

Language Variation and Learning in SELs

Instructional Strategies that Supports Learning in SELs

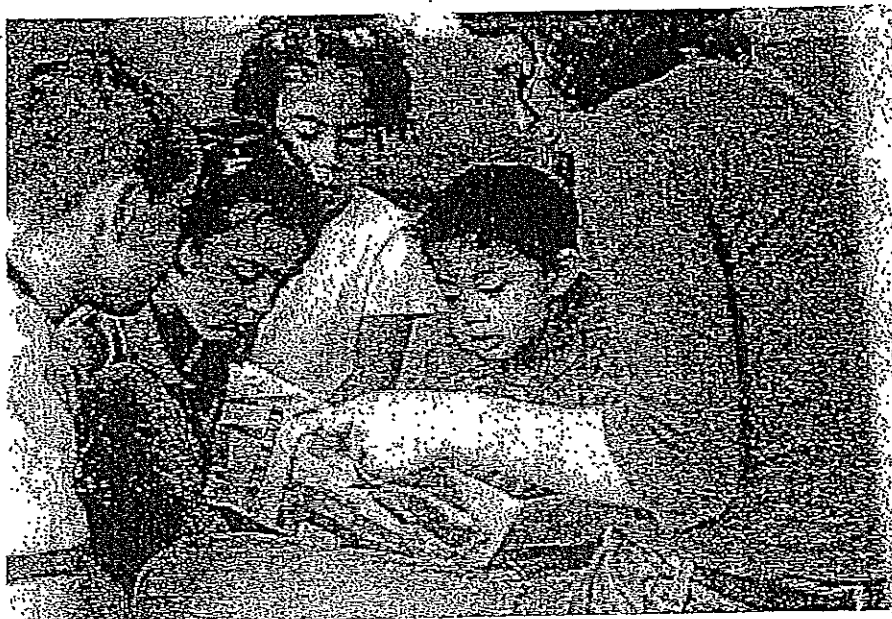
Standard English Learners make up a large percentage of those students who have difficulty acquiring basic language and literacy skills required for success in school. As a group they perform poorly on standardized achievement tests across content areas, and are disproportionately represented among high school dropouts.

The educational issues for SELs are complex. SELs must become literate in the forms of English that appear in newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and consumer contracts. Students are able to access the core curriculums more easily when their language matches the language of school therefore,

Increasing the academic achievement of Standard English Learners and creating classroom environments that will assure them opportunities to learn, will require innovative ways of looking at how we teach. We must identify instructional methodologies and pedagogies that build on the unique cultural and linguistic histories of SELs and that serve as scaffolds to rigorous college preparatory curricula.

Instructional strategies that move Standard English Language Learners toward mastery of school language and literacy include modified traditional instructional approaches and nontraditional instructional approaches. A classroom that is conducive to language acquisition must provide an environment in which students are comfortable using their home language and taking risks as they acquire

mastery of a new language — standard American English. Such an environment will provide students uninterrupted time to engage in, see demonstrated, and come to value language acquisition and literacy skills that are prerequisite to success in school.



Four Critical Approaches to Effective Instruction with SELs include:

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH I:

Enhance teacher's knowledge, understanding and positive attitude toward non-standard language varieties and the students who use them.

Many teachers have limited information about non-standard language varieties, the learning profile of the children who use them, and their impact on instruction. Teachers' low opinions and misunderstandings about non-standard language varieties have been cited in the research as antecedents of the failure of Standard English Language Learners to acquire literacy (Hoover, 1979).

How teachers perceive their students and define themselves in relation to them determine, to a large degree, what the educational experiences of students will be. Teachers who have limited knowledge

of and who devalue the language, culture, and experiences of SELs convey messages that negatively impact their classroom performance and result in lowered aspirations and achievement levels. The best teachers are themselves learners, and knowledge building is an important strategy for combating negative perceptions held, sometimes at a subconscious level, about the ability of Standard English learners.

Sample strategies for achieving this objective:

- Provide ongoing, comprehensive professional development for teachers and paraeducators on the linguistic research relevant to the origin and historical development of non-standard languages and their impact on instruction.
- Support the development of learning communities at the school site that engage teachers in literature circles, lesson study, peer coaching, and analysis of student work as a condition necessary for effectively educating SELs.

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH II:

Integrate linguistic knowledge about non-standard language into instruction.

Standard English Language Learners must come to understand that the language of their home and the language of school differ. Moreover, in order for them to compete successfully in mainstream American language environments, they will need to acquire the ability to use language effectively in cross-cultural situations. The classroom teacher's knowledge of and ability to infuse information about non-standard language forms into instruction is a critical determinant of Standard English Learners' success in school (Agee and Smith, 1974, Bowie and Bond, 1994). As SELs understand how their home language differs from the language of school, the language of school becomes more comprehensible, and their ability to use the target language — Standard American/academic English — improves.

Sample strategies for achieving this objective:

- Infuse information on the origin and historical development of standard and non-standard languages into the instructional curriculum.
- Incorporate contrastive analysis (linguistic, contextual, situational, and elicited) strategies into the daily instruction of SELs through "language breaks" and Mainstream English Language Development (MELD) instruction.





INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

III: Use appropriate second language acquisition methods to support acquisition of school language and literacy.

For Standard English Learners, the widely held belief that their home language mirrors Standard American English is one of the most important factors contributing to their failure in school. The common vocabulary of non-standard language varieties and Standard American English veil the complex phonological, syntactical and pragmatic differences between the two systems and masks the difficulties that speakers of non-standard language varieties have with Standard English form. The language difficulties of SELs may not be recognized until the demands for literacy and learning become greatest, around 3rd or 4th grade. It is imperative that teachers understand that many of the learning problems experienced by

Standard English Learners at this time are related to issues of language difference.

Sample strategies for achieving this objective:

- Incorporate applicable SDAIE strategies into instruction including the use of visuals, manipulatives, graphic organizers, media and other sources to explain concepts.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for students to use language to interact with each other and core content through instructional conversations.

Provide 30-45 minutes per day of Mainstream English Language Development (MELD) instruction that promotes the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in standard and academic English.

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difficulty in school. Teachers must create comfortable learning environments for SELs that validate, affirm and accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity.

If Standard English Language Learners are to gain from their experiences in traditional American schools, teachers must be able to accommodate their distinct learning, communication, and cognitive styles.

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH IV: Build on the learning styles and strengths of Standard English Learners through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to enhance learning

Learning styles are an important dynamic in the classroom that impacts instruction. Teachers who instruct Standard English Language Learners must contextualize instruction in the experiences, learning styles, and strengths of the students' culture. The cultural and linguistic differences of Standard English Language Learners can result in school socialization and adaptation difficulties that lead to low achievement (see Cummins, 1989; Hale-Benson, 1986)

The research confirms that in order for students to be successful academically, they must first be comfortable with themselves. Yet, many researchers agree that the traditional school culture reflects the dominant class and that minority students often become disadvantaged and lose their perceptions of personal competence, not long after they start their formal schooling (Gay, 1993). Students, who have low self-esteem due to lack of confidence in their potential, experience



Sample strategies for achieving this objective:

- Incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy into the instruction of SELs to scaffold learning within a rigorous standards-based curriculum.
- Develop communal and cooperative learning environments in the classroom.
- Create high movement context learning environments.
- Convey knowledge on ancient Africa, Mexico, Hawaii, and North America: their cultures and history.
- Convey knowledge of the impact of diverse cultures on the modern world with an emphasis on historical and contemporary achievers.

The learning profile of Standard English Language Learners differs in many ways from the profile of students whose home language and culture match the language and culture of the school. In order for culturally and linguistically different SELs to experience greater success in acquiring school literacy and learning, teachers will need ongoing, comprehensive professional development to support construction of learning environments that are authentic, culturally responsive, and that build upon their language, experiences, learning styles, and strengths to promote learning. The AEMP Instructional Framework breaks down barriers to academic success by providing opportunities for teachers to acquire knowledge that shapes positive attitudes toward SELs and strategies that scaffold learning and increase SELs' access to rigorous standards-based curricula.

For further discussion of these perspectives see:

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