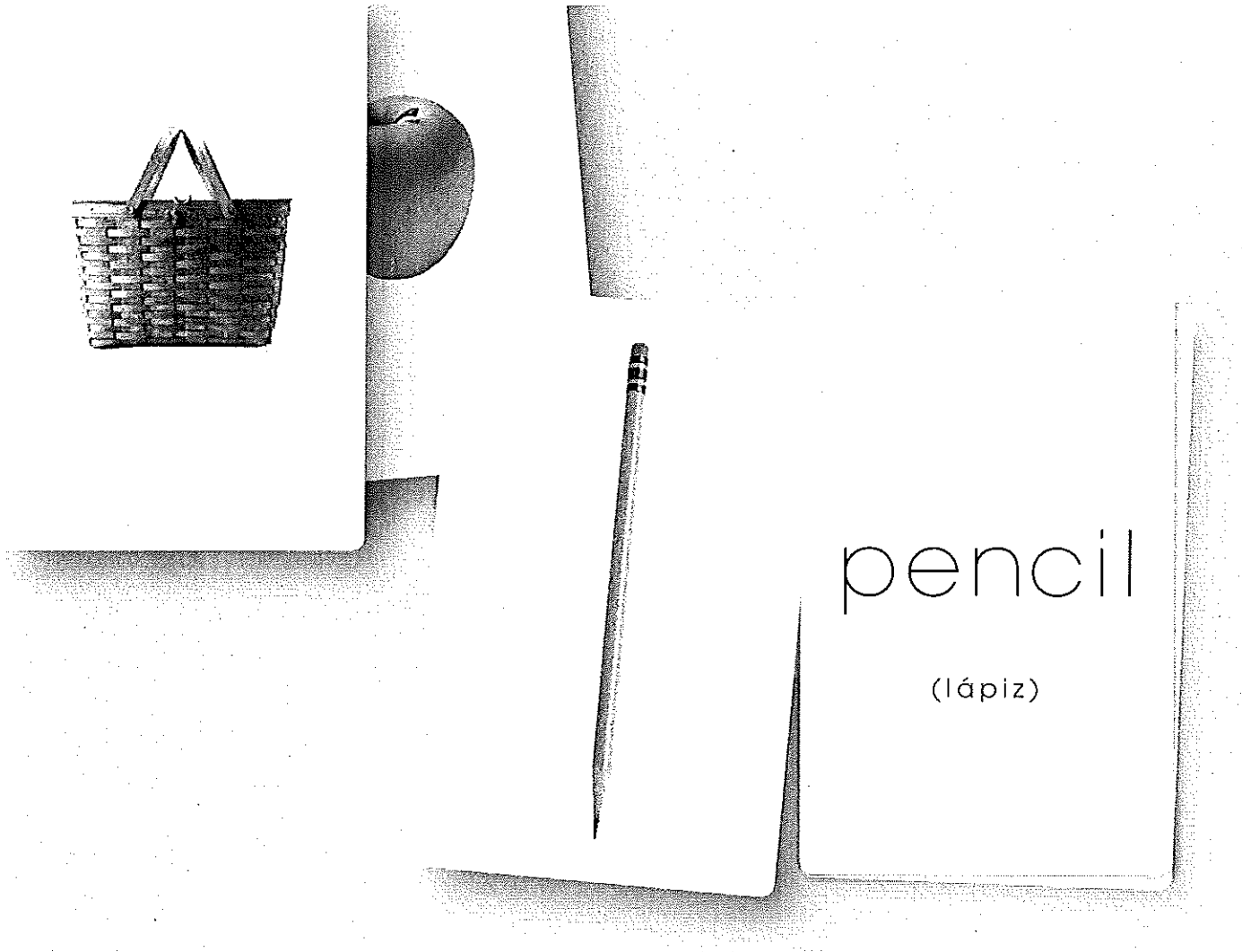


# Effective Instruction for **English-Language Learners**

Research focused on instructional strategies of ELL students highlights both the complexity of the task and the importance of educators' roles in developing effective programs. **by Nancy Protheroe**

Schools across the country are currently facing the challenge of increasing numbers of students identified as English-language learners (ELL). Thus, knowledge of research about effective instruction for ELLs is becoming more important. On a positive note for principals, work has been done during the past few years to pull together critical components of a large and complex research base on ELL instruction in a way that provides practical guidance.

## Dispelling Myths

Linda Espinosa (2008), a professor of early childhood education and author of more than 50 articles on instruction for ELLs, uses research to challenge some common myths about young (pre-K through third grade) ELLs. Three of these myths have special relevance for effective elementary-grades instruction.

MYTH 1: **Learning two languages during the early years will confuse young children and possibly delay their acquisition of English.** "The opposite holds true," Espinosa says. She points to research from neuroscience and psycholinguistics that "suggests that the development of two languages benefits the brain through the development of greater brain density in areas related to language, memory, and attention." In addition, "studies have also demonstrated that knowing more than one language does not delay the acquisition of English."

MYTH 2: **The best way for young ELLs to acquire English is through an English immersion approach.** Countering this assertion is research that has found that "young ELL students require systematic support for the continued development of their home language." This is important because for young children who have not yet mastered the elements of their first language, "completely shifting from their first language to a new, unfamiliar language too early may have a negative effect on English fluency and academic achievement during the PK-3 years and beyond."

MYTH 3: **Since schools can't provide instruction in all the languages represented by their students, it makes sense to provide English-only instruction.** The research makes clear the importance of helping students gain facility in their native language as a support for learning English. Thus, "teachers and programs can adopt effective strategies to support home language development even when the teachers are monolingual English speakers." Specifically, teachers should use instructional approaches that provide opportunities for children to use their home languages—perhaps by providing time for buddy discussions that pair children by the language they use at home—in addition to the English they are learning. Also, Espinosa advises that teachers and other school staff can train parents, community members, and volunteers to work with ELL children in their home language. For example, it is important for parents to understand that reading to and with children in their home language can support development of reading skills that transfer to reading in English.

## Key Findings

Goldenberg and Quach (2010) discuss instructional implications of the findings from two major reviews of research on educating ELLs, one conducted by the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (NLP) and the other by researchers associated with the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE). In their view, the NLP and CREDE syntheses "represent the most concerted efforts to date to identify the best knowledge available" and are also "catalysts to untangling the role of the primary language instruction in ELLs' education." Goldenberg and Quach identify three main points that emerge from the findings in the two reports.

**Teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English.** A meta-analysis of the research is presented in the NLP's *Developing Literacy in Second-language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*, while the CREDE study,

*Educating English Language Learners: A Synthesis of Research Evidence*, is a narrative review. However, both include a similar finding. Goldenberg and Quach discuss the educational implications of the idea: "The effects of primary language instruction are modest—but they are real. Productive learning in one language makes a positive contribution in the second language." They go on to explain that "after 2 to 3 years of primary [home] language reading instruction, the average student can expect to score 12 to 15 percentile points higher than the average student who only receives second language [English] reading instruction."

**What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for ELLs.** Findings from both the CREDE and NLP reports suggest that "good instruction for students in general tends to be good instruction for ELLs in particular," although the specific strategies suggested have not been studied with ELLs to the degree they have been with English speakers. Goldenberg and Quach go on to address instructional approaches for which there is evidence. These include explicit teaching of broad components of literacy such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as more specific understandings such as how letters combine to form words.

The CREDE report reaches similar conclusions and stresses the importance of instruction that combines explicit and direct teaching of skills with interactive approaches such as structured discussions or brainstorming—again, an approach to instruction found effective for non-ELL students as well.

> Explicit support for ELL students' use of their native languages can help—not hinder—their capacity to use and understand English.

**When instructing ELLs in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students' language capacities, needs, and limitations.** While stressing that the two reports indicate that ELL students benefit from instructional strategies identified as effective for non-ELL students, Goldenberg and Quach also append a "however" to the previous research-based finding. Specifically, "a very important finding that emerged from the NLP's review was that the impact of instructional practices or interventions tends to be weaker for ELLs than for English speakers," thus pointing to the need for additional instructional strategies to explicitly support the special needs of ELL students.

## Instructional Models and Strategies

The U.S. Department of Education's Center on Instruction used the research base to develop guidance for educators on strategies that have been effective in instructing English-language learners and to support efforts to select and develop programs for their schools. The researchers (Moughamian, Rivera, & Francis, 2009) first summarize information about various approaches to instructing ELLs (e.g., English-only or transitional bilingual programs). They then conclude that, while the programs varied in the degree to which a student's native language or English was used, "effective strategies have much in common." Examples of such strategies follow.

- A focus on oral language development, such as opportunities to practice English in the classroom, building on students' background knowledge;
- Cooperative learning;
- Explicit instruction in the elements of English literacy;
- Differentiated instruction;
- The use of graphic organizers as a comprehension strategy; and
- A focus on academic language.

The report also stresses the need to carefully consider characteristics of the ELL students being served, as well as local school and community resources relevant to ELL instruction, when making decisions about instructional models, programs, and practices. For example: How long have students lived in the U.S. (e.g., are they recent immigrants, second-generation, etc.)? What kinds of language resources are available to the students at home or in their community? What are the experience levels of teachers? How much experience do the teachers have working with ELL students?

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*Challenging Common Myths about Young English Language Learners*, published by the Foundation for Child Development, focuses on instructional and other **issues related to educating young ELLs**.

"Instructing English Language Learners: Assessing the State of Our Knowledge," offers a **detailed overview** of the research on education of ELL students.

*Instructional Models and Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* was developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Center on Instruction to provide **"guidance on research-based strategies** that have been effective in instructing English Language learners."

## Critical Issues

In their report, Goldenberg and Quach indicate that further research is necessary to address "critical questions" that still remain unanswered. For example:

- Is primary language instruction more beneficial for some learners than for others?
- Is it more helpful for learners with weaker or stronger primary language skills?
- Is it more effective in some settings and with certain ELL populations than others?
- What should be the relative emphasis between promoting knowledge and skills in the primary language and developing English language proficiency?
- How long should students receive instruction in their primary language?
- Looking at English language development, what is the optimal mix of 1) opportunities for students to use English in meaningful situations and 2) "explicit teaching that helps students directly and efficiently learn features of [English] such as vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, and norms of social usage"?

This article has focused thus far on research—as well as practical guidance from the research—about instructional approaches and strategies for use with ELL students. However, other research has identified the importance of the context in which instruction is provided.

For example, researchers at The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Elfers et al., 2009) stress the need to develop systems of support for classroom teachers working with ELLs to help them more effectively serve these students. They go on to identify what they view as four important components of such a system:

- Support for professional learning;
- Staff support (e.g., coaches and paraprofessionals);
- Access to curriculum and materials appropriate for ELL students; and
- A school "community" to support teacher sharing of knowledge, materials, and moral support.

In their view, "alignment, integration, and coordination are key," since "when supports are not integrated or aligned with other school initiatives, they can result in confusion and incoherence rather than support for instruction."

Researchers working on a study conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools would agree with this assessment of the importance of a coherent, aligned approach to educating ELLs. Although the council's study focused on districts instead of schools, many of its findings could apply to schools. In addition, elements of the study could provide a strong platform for discussion among district and school leaders concerning more effective instruction for ELL students. Both "promising practices" and "limiting factors" were identified. For example, high-quality, relevant professional development that "tended to be rigorous and long-term, providing educators with hands-on, site-based strategies for ELL instruction" is cited as a promising practice (Horwitz et al., 2009). These initiatives were targeted not only for ELL teachers but all teachers of ELLs, as well as principals and school administrators.

In contrast, in less-effective settings, ELL departments and staff were "compartmentalized." They appeared to work in isolation from other instructional departments and programs, which resulted in "the ineffective use of funds, less access to instructional resources and training, and the general sense that ELL staff and teachers—alone—were responsible for the achievement of ELLs."

## Summary

This brief review of research focused on instruction of ELL students highlights both the complexity of the task and the importance of educators' roles in developing effective programs. However, there are a few findings that should be stressed. First, explicit support for ELL students' use of their native languages can help—not hinder—their capacity to use and understand English. Second, instructional approaches identified by other research as effective with students in general can also be effective with ELLs; however, these students also need strategies specifically aligned with their needs. Finally, the system makes a difference—it can add to or detract from a classroom teacher's ability to educate ELLs. This includes factors such as the role of ELL staff, the use of resources, and support for classroom teachers. ■

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