Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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Supporting English Language Learners

By Nancy Protheroe

Over the past few decades, schools have experienced a significant upsurge in English Language Learners (ELLs) who come to them speaking little to no English. "According to state reports, the 4.7 million students identified as ELs [English learners] in 2007–08 constituted about 10 percent of the nation's K–12 student enrollment" (Boyle, Taylor, Hurlburt, & Sogar, 2010, p. 1). This represents an increase of 34% since 1997–98 [calculated using data from National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs, n.d.]. Some ELLs have had little formal experience with schooling. This trend becomes even more challenging because many such students are required to participate in standardized testing before they are proficient in English.

Secondary schools face unique problems, and "ensuring that English language learning students have equal access to content-area curriculum continues to be a challenge for many secondary educators" (Perez and Holmes, 2010, p. 32). There has also been a shift in expectations away from viewing ELLs as the responsibility solely of ESL teachers and toward shared responsibility with content-area teachers. Walqui et al. found it "far from hyperbole to insist that English Learners are everyone's responsibility" (2010, p. 5). However, this shared responsibility brings with it additional challenges. Elfers et al. described:

> ELL students bring special needs to the classroom—all classrooms, not just those of bilingual or ESL specialists. These needs persist over time, even after the point at which these students exit a formal program that serves them.... Their learning needs pose new instructional challenges to an ever-growing proportion of teachers. Many classroom teachers

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Just the Facts

- "It is far from hyperbole to insist that English Learners are everyone's responsibility." (Walqui et al., 2010, p. 5)
- "There is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the literacy challenges that confront adolescent ELLs." (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007, p. 12).
- "Ensuring that English language learning (ELL) students have equal access to content-area curriculum continues to be a challenge for many secondary educators." (Perez & Holmes, 2010, p. 32)
- "Having a critical mass of teachers with common training around ELL issues facilitated collaboration and instructional improvement efforts across the school." (Elfers et al., 2009, p. 39)

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are currently not well equipped to fully meet those challenges. (Elfers et al., 2009, p. 8)

Thus, schools must better support teachers as they work with ELLs, and schools must ensure that their policies and procedures are contributing to efforts to educate ELLs.

Research on ELL Instruction: An Overview

Diversity within the ELL student population complicates school efforts to educate ELLs. According to Short and Fitzsimons (2007):

> *There is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the literacy challenges that confront adolescent ELLs.* These students are experiencing different levels of success and motivation to learn academic literacy skills in English. Those with a strong foundation in their native language are making better progress than are those without it. Those with a consistent language program model and regular schooling have a better chance for success than do those who go to school intermittently or switch between bilingual and ESL programs. It is critical to consider where these students are on the path to academic English literacy in order to select the best services for them. The implication is that instruction and other interventions should take these factors into account but recognize that second language literacy development is a complex matter in which combinations of these factors play a role. (p. 12)

Diversity also makes it more difficult to identify effective instructional approaches. In addition, another "problem related to the identification of effective practices for teaching ELL students is that much attention has been given to the debate over programs, placement, and language of instruction with less attention to effective teaching practices" (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 7). For example, some researchers have focused on comparisons of English-only instruction with transitional bilingual programs.

However, there has been a shift toward studying two other components. First, researchers have begun to examine instructional strategies that seem to more effectively support ELL learning. Second, they have begun to analyze profiles of schools and districts that have been more successful in educating ELLs. Both approaches hold promise for providing school leaders and teachers with helpful direction.

Instructional Strategies

Goldenberg and Quach analyzed two overviews of research on ELL instruction—one developed by researchers at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) and another by the National Literacy Panel (NLP). They described differences between the two—the CREDE report is "almost exclusively limited to quantitative studies... whereas the NLP also included qualitative studies" (Goldenberg & Quach, 2010, p. 3). However, Goldenberg and Quach considered the major findings to be consistent with each other and provided a "foundation for improving the education of children from non-English speaking homes" (p. 4). They identified three themes:

- "Teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in *English*" (p. 4). Teaching reading in either the first language or in the first language simultaneously with instruction in English (at different times of the day) both lead to higher levels of learning in English than instruction only in English.
- "What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for ELLs.... As a general rule, all students benefit from the following: clear goals and learning objectives; meaningful, challenging, and motivating contexts; a curriculum rich with content; well-designed, clearly structured, and appropriately paced instruction; active engagement and participation; opportunities to practice, apply, and transfer new learning; appropriate feedback on correct and incorrect responses; periodic review and practice; frequent assess-

ments to gauge progress, with re-teaching as needed; and opportunities to interact with other students in motivating and appropriately structured contexts. Although these instructional variables have not been studied with ELLs to the degree they have been with English speakers, existing studies suggest that what is known about effective instruction in general ought to be the foundation of effective teaching for ELLs" (p. 8).

- "When instructing ELLs in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students' language capacities, needs, and limitations. Although many aspects of effective instruction apply across the board for learners in general, for ELLs, *instructional modifications are almost certainly necessary*. 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" (p. 9).

Although these broad findings provided some direction, Lindholm-Leary and Borsato (2006) found that the research base was lacking in specific information about instructional, classroom-based strategies:

> There is a dearth of empirical research on instructional strategies or approaches to reaching content.... Which techniques are effective in producing high-level academic outcomes with ELLs is still an open question, as little empirical work has been done on this question. (p. 190)

Researchers have begun to focus on this issue, however. In a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education's Center on Instruction, Moughamian, Rivera, and Francis (2009) compared broad approaches for instruction of ELLs (for example, transitional bilingual programs) and then took an important next step. They examined the instructional strategies and found that although the programs varied in the degree to which a student's native language or English was used, "effective strategies [used within each of these frameworks] have much in common" (p. 22). These strategies included:

- 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. (Moughamian, Rivera, & Francis, 2009, p. 22)

The National Literacy Panel examined opportunities for oral language development and found:

> Instruction in the key components of reading is necessary—but not sufficient—for teaching language-minority students to read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical as well—but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked in instruction. (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 4)

Opportunities for classroom conversation contributed to ELL students' comprehension of content and gave teachers additional data to help them assess ELL progress. Willig, Bresser, Melanese, Sphar, and Felux (2010) suggested that even students whose "comprehension of English is more advanced than their ability to speak the language" (p. 27) can participate if teachers effectively structure questions. For example, answers can be a simple thumbs up or thumbs down, a yes or no, or a one-word response (Willig et al., 2010; Hill & Björk, 2008).

Academic English

One critical element of content-area instruction for secondary school ELL students is specialized vocabulary. Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) explained:

> Learning academic language is one of the most pressing challenges ELLs face. Knowledge of academic disciplines—science, social

> studies, history, and math—is of course what content area instruction is all about. But just as important is the language needed to learn about and discuss academic content. (p. 98)

They also stressed that "Academic language development does not take place naturally. Rather, it must be taught" (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010, p. 95). Thus, it is important that teachers of ELL students explicitly teach content-area vocabulary and provide all students with opportunities to practice using the new words (Haynes & Zacarian, 2010).

> For more on academic English, see *Principal's Research Review*, "Learning the Language of the Classroom: Academic English for Nonnative Speakers" (January 2008) www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/56824.pdf

School and District Practices

Another significant area of research in ELL instruction is school and district practices. Coleman and Goldenberg (2010) summarized:

> The one thing that seems to surface when looking at the studies as a whole is the importance of a coherent academic program where teachers and administrators focus on doing whatever is necessary to ensure the academic achievement of ELs. In other words, higher achievement levels for ELs appear to be the result of focused, sustained, and coordinated work among educators committed to the educational success of these students. (p. 158)

Walqui et al. (2010) identified practices likely to better support the education of ELLs:

- Accelerate the pace at which ELLs engage with grade-level content
- Provide additional grade-level support (not remediation) for students who need it. (p. 62)

Additional recommendations by Walqui et al. include:

- Avoid EL placements that are isolating and stigmatizing. Do not deny any group of EL students the well-supported experience of challenging mainstream classes.
- Design lessons that are demanding but enticing. Scaffold students' access to important disciplinary content and processes. Design lessons that involve students in explaining, comparing, and hypothesizing—in collaboration with others.
- Provide administrators with the professional development that allows them to be instructional leaders on behalf of English Learners.
- Make ELs everyone's responsibility. (pp. 4–5)

Barriers to Effective Instruction

Unfortunately, some school and district practices work against effective instruction for ELL students. For example, the Council of Great City Schools compared the practices of four school districts achieving relative success with education of ELLs with those of two less-successful districts. Researchers identified limiting factors in the less-successful districts and noted that there was no coherent vision or strategy for the instruction of ELLs systemwide, there was a lack of access to the general curriculum, there was no system in place for ensuring that ELLs had access to the core curriculum or were being taught to the same standards as other students, there was no systematic use of disaggregated student data to track the academic progress of ELLs, and ELL departments and staff members worked in isolation from other programs. This resulted in the ineffective use of funds, less access to instructional resources and training, and the general sense that ELL staff members and teachers—alone—were responsible for the achievement of ELLs (Horwitz et al., 2009).

Walqui et al. (2010) identified additional factors that impeded the education of ELLs:

- An "implementation gap" between district policies and supports for English learners and school practices that contributed to reduced effectiveness of programs;

- The use of ineffective teaching practices to support second language acquisition and to scaffold access to subject area content (pp.3–4).

Supporting Teachers: A Critical Element

Research indicated a strong need to better support teachers in providing effective instruction for ELL students and emphasized that a lack of teacher readiness in this area is a major problem. Principals identified "inadequate preparation and training of teachers" as a factor contributing to "ineffective teaching and classroom support" (Walqui et al., 2010, p. 41). In addition, the researchers found that "supporting teachers' work with second language learners is inherently more difficult at the secondary level than in elementary schools" (Elfers et al., 2009, p. 9) because students face increasingly complex content and vocabulary.

Principals in high schools where ELLs achieved at higher than expected levels ranked professional development efforts for teachers first among factors that contributed to their schools' success (Rivera, et al., 2010). Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) suggested several areas on which teacher development should focus:

- **First and second language acquisition theory**—knowledge of how children learn their first language and how learning a second language differs, and which first language literacy skills transfer to the second language and how
- **Subject-area content**—a basic understanding of the subjects ELLs take in secondary schools for ESL teachers, a deep understanding for content-area teachers
- **ESL and sheltered instruction methodologies**—knowledge of how to integrate language development activities and explanations with content-area instruction
- **Content-area pedagogy**—knowledge of specific methods for different content areas
- **Content-area language and discourse**—an understanding of how language is used in a specific subject area or discipline and of subject-specific text genres and structures
- **Linguistic and cross-cultural contexts**—an understanding of language policies, sociocultural factors that influence language use and classroom behavior, and similarities and differences between English and student native languages
- **Curriculum development**—knowledge of how to design content-based ESL and sheltered subject curricula that integrate language development with content topics
- **Assessment**—knowledge of how to minimize the English language demands of assessments to allow ELLs to demonstrate content knowledge and how to employ and interpret multiple measures of assessment to get a fuller picture of student knowledge and ability. (pp. 23–24)

A study of teachers in California, including 1,300 secondary teachers, found that "teachers need and want to see what good EL instruction looks like" (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Benavídez, 2007, p. 14). Coleman and Goldenberg (2010) suggested that the most effective approach to staff development is likely to be provided by colleagues and instructional specialists on an ongoing basis, with time available for teachers to discuss concrete issues and challenges, "Studies reviewed...suggested that professional development cannot be of the one-shot workshop variety. Instead, it must be embedded in the work lives of teachers and the routines of teaching" (p. 161).

A four-year study by the Carnegie Corporation examined the education of ELLs in 20 New York middle and high schools. Each school adopted two programs to better address the needs of the ELLs. Matched schools that did not implement the programs were selected as a control group. The schools that "implemented ExC-ELL and RIGOR schoolwide moved from low-performing to high-performing in two years" (Calderón, 2009, p. 14). Calderon continued:

> Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners (ExC-ELL) was designed as a professional development

program for mainstream teachers of math, science, social studies, and language arts. Intensive professional development by experts helped teachers integrate vocabulary and reading comprehension skills development into daily lessons. At the same time, Reading Instructional Goals for Older Readers (RIGOR), a curriculum for middle and high school ELLs reading at a K–2 level, was developed as an intensive intervention for children with low literacy levels in their native language and other struggling readers. The program used science and social studies leveled readers to develop reading skills and basic and academic language. (p. 14)

Content-area teachers were taught specific ways to adapt approaches they already used to teach vocabulary to non-ELLs to more effectively support ELL students. Some approaches included:

- Teach important words before reading, not after;
- Teach as many words as possible before, during, and after reading;
- Teach simple everyday words (Tier 1) along with information processing words (Tier 2), and content specific/academic words (Tier 3);
- Use new words within the context of reading, talking, and writing in the same class period....;
- Emphasize and use lexical items (e.g., tense, root, affixes, phrasal and idiomatic uses) as strategic learning tools;
- Teach ELLs key words for a reading assignment, testing them at the end;
- Avoid sending ELLs to look up words in the dictionary. This doesn't help; and
- Avoid having a peer translate for ELLs—this doesn't help either. (Calderón, 2009, p. 15)

However, more than high-quality staff development is likely needed to meet teacher needs. Elfers et al. (2009) called for a strong system of support to help teachers work effectively with ELLs. They also identified four key components: support for professional learning; staff support (for example, coaches and paraprofessionals); access to curriculum and materials appropriate for ELL students; and a school community that supports teacher sharing of knowledge, materials, and encouragement. Elfers et al. (2009) also found that:

> Having a critical mass of teachers with common training around ELL issues facilitated collaboration and instructional improvement efforts across the school.... In schools and districts where systems of support were focused on instruction of ELL students, teachers were able to clearly articulate what those supports were, how they could leverage them to improve instructional practice, and identify areas for improvement [emphasis added]. (pp. 39–40)

In Summary

Research provides helpful direction for school leaders; however, to improve ELL instruction, staff members must work together to identify problems in a school and should ask:

- How do we provide support for ELL students? Is the system we use for classroom teacher/ESL teacher collaboration working?
- Are there topics related to ELL students and their education about which we, as a faculty, feel we need more information? How might we get that?
- Are there ways that some parts of the school day could be restructured to provide stronger support for ELL students, perhaps through grouping by skill level for part of the day while still including ELL students in regular classrooms for other periods?
- What's not working for our ELL students? How can we address these problems? (Protheroe, 2010, p. 79)

Also, a principal committed to improving the effectiveness of ELL programs must first assess the coherence of the school's program and ensure that all of the program elements work together toward the goal of success for ELL students. PRR

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