

English Learners and English Language Arts Education

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Introduction

The historic events of 2020 have dramatically exposed systemic racism embedded in the fabric of this country. The COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on the social, economic, and physical well-being of racially marginalized populations, the murders of Black Americans at the hands of police, the criminalization of asylum seekers and immigrants, and the increased overtly racist discourse from our top levels of government have put systemic racism on display for the world. Educational systems have most certainly contributed to these inequities, and the upending of our schools due to the pandemic has only exacerbated these problems for our most underserved students, including English learners (ELs).² However, this moment also presents a profound opportunity for stakeholders committed to equity and justice to reexamine educational structures, policies, and practices. We have the chance to transform schools and learning experiences to reflect an inclusive and anti-racist vision of society.

As leaders across the country respond to our country's legacy of inequity for students categorized as English learners, magnified by a pandemic and the mounting complexities of distance learning, it is essential that we seek alignment in current research-based pedagogy and practice. At the moment, we still see widespread practices that contradict the clear and broadly-accepted implications of the research evidence. EL classification is not designed to impact the social status of students, but there is wide recognition that pull-out programs and remedial courses often result in social stigmatization and barriers to educational opportunity within schools.³ In addition, EL policies have changed substantially over time, and lack of consistency across schools, districts, and states has added unnecessary instability to the educational experiences of an already traditionally marginalized population.⁴

A more cohesive vision for the future will require supportive, ongoing and embedded professional development for pre- and in-service teachers that focuses on the following: culturally sustaining pedagogy⁵ that builds on students' assets,⁶ well-designed student interaction,⁷ responsive formative assessment,⁸ and thoughtful attention to language while amplifying content.⁹ In addition, instructional leaders must cultivate learning environments which encourage reading engagement for students, both through the use of metacognitive strategies, as well as increased time and choice in materials.¹⁰ Educators may need to rethink the ways we've traditionally approached language and literacy instruction, while gaining the precision and knowledge necessary to do so effectively. Our efforts cannot be limited to the classroom, but must also consider how to bring family and community knowledge and practices into schools, and engage caregivers more deeply in our efforts. Education leaders will need to ensure coherent systems designed to support coaches, teachers, and students and provide sufficient resources for those systems to operate effectively. Policy makers must examine and remove barriers to innovations that optimize equitable district and school practices. Teachers, in collaboration with students, parents, administrators, and community, remain the *key element* in realizing the full potential of a child, regardless of their cultural heritage or linguistic background.¹¹

This paper, as a companion piece to the Coalition for English Learner Equity (CELE) Statement of Agreement, endeavors to highlight the foundational principles and the current research supporting key agreements in the field of language and literacy development in English Language Arts (ELA) so that all stakeholders are working in solidarity from a common understanding. The EL Coalition recognizes that a variety of stakeholders such as policy makers, parents, communities, and educators comprise the interacting systems

1. Special thanks to Dr. Amanda Kibler of Oregon State University for her advising, leadership, and guidance on this project.

2. The Coalition for English Learner Equity prefers the term "linguistically and culturally diverse students" to describe the heterogeneous group of learners that includes students who are bureaucratically labeled as English learners. However, as this paper discusses existing research which consistently uses "English learners", it has preserved that nomenclature.

3. Valdés, Bunch, Snow, Lee, & Matos, 2005; Hakuta, 2011; Umansky, 2016; Rosa, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017

4. Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016

5. Paris & Alim, 2017

6. Castellón et al., 2015

7. Cohen & Lotan, 2014

8. Llosa, 2011

9. Walqui & Bunch, 2020

10. Duke, 2000; Guthrie, 2004; Valdés, et al., 2014; Walqui & Bunch, 2020

11. Ball, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Snyder & Bae, 2017



engaged in supporting English learners. The EL Coalition seeks to unite all stakeholders in the effort to provide ELs with “an engaging, relevant, and humanizing education... that empowers them to make sense of the world and to appreciate their power to reason, communicate, and create change”.¹² Doing so will require access to meaningful, high-impact, language-and-content-integrated instruction and material, effective networks of support that attend to their developmental needs, and resources to develop agency, identity, and ownership of their lives and in their communities. To that end, this document can help guide decisions and policies made at all levels to support ELs and their educational success.

While there is a considerable body of research on literacy and language development in monolingual speakers, and many of those practices are also relevant to ELs,¹³ English learners have unique contributions and challenges that must also be considered and addressed. In focusing on the language and literacy development of ELs in ELA classrooms, it is essential to note the diversity within this group. They represent a range of ages, a variety of home languages, cultures, ethnicities, and races as well as different schooling experiences, proficiency levels, lengths of time in the U.S., and status as citizens or immigrants. Successful programs must embrace and account for this diversity. As Guzman-Orth, Song, and Sparks explain, current research indicates that “there is no one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility for ELs”.¹⁴ It is also important to note that this paper focuses on how language and literacy develop together for English learners across a range of ages. Since language and literacy demands and needs can be quite different across grade levels, we highlight research from a variety of contexts. The paper is organized into two sections. The first section outlines several foundational principles and theories that undergird effective instruction for English learners. The second part highlights research on instructional practices aligned with these principles, and implications for stakeholders across the system.

Foundational Principles of Language Development

Before examining research findings about language and literacy development in ELA contexts, it is essential to highlight the foundational principles regarding the use and development of language that inform the ways in which we review the research. These principles are as follows:

- Classrooms are Embedded in Social and Political Realities
- All Children Come to School with Resources and Assets
- Language is Variable and Dynamic
- Language Develops Through Meaningful Interaction

Classrooms are Embedded in Social and Political Realities

Within every modern society across the globe, a variety of cultures coexist. As a result, children from different backgrounds may find the rules for using language in the classroom different from those they have learned at home.¹⁵ Demanding that students change the ways in which they speak, write, and think for more “academic” or “standard” cultural patterns may have the effect of distancing them from their family, while marginalizing them as valued thinkers. “It may cut at the heart of who they are”.¹⁶ Stakeholders at all levels can better recognize and honor the diverse language and learning practices of all children by paying critical attention to how our education maintains existing power structures and reinforces deficit views.¹⁷ We must acknowledge that our schools are parts of larger social and political contexts that reinforce many structural inequalities continuing to oppress children and families based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, gender identity, ability, and of course language.¹⁸ The term *English Learner* functions as a bureaucratic label to denote students in U.S. schools who have not yet been deemed proficient in English, but the label itself implies a deficit, emphasizing what a child may have yet to develop rather than what he or she can already do. *Long-term English Learner* can be even more problematic because of the way it puts an expected timeline on language development, and the way that it lumps together an incredibly diverse array of students, even including those for whom English may be a preferred or dominant language.¹⁹ Likewise, terms like *Native English Speaker*, *Standard English*, and *Academic Language* inherently elevate some forms of language, and their

12. English Learners Success Forum, 2020

13. Goldenberg, 2013; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

14. Guzman-Orth, Song, and Sparks, 2019, p. 6

15. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

16. New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996

17. Flores & Rosa, 2015; Alim, 2005; Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001

18. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

19. Kibler, Karam., Futch Ehrlich, Bergey, Wang, & Molloy Elreda, 2018; Kibler & Valdés, 2016



speakers, over others.²⁰ These terms fail to see the ways many children speak and learn at home as sufficient for academic success, reinforcing patterns of colonization that have dominated our education system since its inception.²¹

All Children Come to School with Resources and Assets

A second principle grounded in current research is that all students come to school with cultural and language resources and assets, and develop best in learning environments that affirm their unique identities.²² Children categorized as English learners are a diverse group of students from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and home languages.²³ Whether starting in preschool or high-school, they bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the classroom.²⁴ The unique assets they contribute are critical to providing a foundation upon which teachers can build.²⁵ As Bunch et al. explain, “All learning builds on students’ prior knowledge and experiences; instruction for ELs must consider *and expand* what ELs bring to the classroom.”²⁶ This includes students’ home languages, in both bilingual and English-only settings, as building from an individual’s existing language resources will only strengthen his or her development in an additional language.²⁷ Our efforts to recognize and build upon children’s assets must also engage families and invite their community practices into schools in more culturally sustaining ways.²⁸ It is imperative that the foundation of curricula, policies, and educator practice take students’ multilingualism, identities and cultures as a starting point in their learning. This asset-based perspective of English learners and their families validates their identities and leverages their strengths in ways that further develop their capacity.²⁹ In the words of Paulo Freire, “If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing.”³⁰

Empirical evidence suggests that recognizing and building upon students’ identities and cultural and multilingual experiences improves ELs’ academic success.³¹ According to *Promising Futures*: “Instructional routines that draw on students’ home language, knowledge, and cultural assets support literacy development in English.”³² Examples of the instructional routines documented in the 2017 report include: previewing and reviewing material in children’s home language, engaging in conversations in students’ home language to clarify and comprehend, providing definitions and vocabulary in students’ home language, teaching cognates, and connecting concepts with students’ prior knowledge from their communities. Other studies have found a significant relationship between performance in ELs’ home language and additional language in reading, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension, and reading strategies, verifying that developing first language literacy improves English literacy.³³ In a review of research on writing instruction for young ELs, Williams and Lowrance-Faulhaber describe several studies that demonstrate “strong support”³⁴ for home language instruction and dual language learning as students “used both languages to direct their writing and applied linguistic knowledge bidirectionally.”³⁵ Castellón et al. note that teachers from schools successful with ELs “recognize that the cultural and language assets of their ELLs can be used to formulate and strengthen students’ language and academic development, in part through using resources from both languages. Students’ assets are employed such that students increase their mastery of content knowledge and analytical practices while moving toward greater fluency in academic English.”³⁶

Language is Variable and Dynamic

The notion that language varies greatly by context, audience, medium, and purpose is also essential to

20. Valdés, Bunch, Snow, Lee, and Matos, 2005; Rosa, 2016; McSwan, 2020

21. Rosa, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017

22. Yosso, 2005

23. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

24. Heritage, Walqui & Linquanti, 2020; Bunch, Kibler, & Pimentel, 2012; Yosso 2005

25. Gándara, 2016; Bunch et al., 2012

26. Bunch et al., 2012

27. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

28. Paris & Alim, 2017

29. Valencia, 2010

30. Freire, 1970, p. 19

31. e.g., Llosa et al. 2016

32. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; 2017, p. 297

33. Dressler & Kamil, 2006

34. Williams and Lowrance-Faulhaber, 2018, p.67

35. Ibid., p. 68

36. Castellón et al., 2015, p. 4-5



understanding how best to support ELs.³⁷ The way that one communicates depends greatly upon the context, with whom, and why one is communicating.³⁸ For example, when children arrive at school in kindergarten, practitioners must know that they have already acquired the ability to use language in meaningful and effective ways within their families and communities.³⁹ At the same time, only children whose families use language in ways that are very similar to standard English in the U.S. will have acquired the “rules for using school-like language”.⁴⁰ In the United States, school systems and teachers often value particular varieties of standard English acquired by more privileged families who have traditionally been white and middle or upper-middle-class. While these values are rarely expressed overtly, students often quickly get the message through assessments and interactions with peers and teachers that certain ways of speaking are preferred, while the way they and their families speak may be problematized and viewed as incorrect.⁴¹ Fortunately, there are ways to address this:

Teachers who understand the nature of register variation can focus on expanding students’ repertoire to include the styles of various academic conventions, such as a written paper or oral presentation, without expecting students to abandon styles appropriate for other contexts, such as collaborating with a colleague, seeking advice from a teacher, or socializing with a friend.⁴²

Moving forward with the notion that no form of English is inherently more complex, academic, or appropriate than another will serve educators in our efforts to better support the academic success of students categorized as ELs.⁴³

Language Develops Through Meaningful Interaction

For most children, enhancing opportunities for language development in school will involve providing opportunities for them to expand their linguistic repertoires through *meaningful action*—ie. discussing ideas, understanding texts, or demonstrating their learning.⁴⁴ In doing this, one must remember that, “...students need to perceive that the invitation to engage in learning will result in their benefit; that it is legitimate, treating them as worthwhile participants with something to contribute to the exchange...”⁴⁵ In a review of research on young bilingual students’ growth as writers, Williams and Lowrance-Faulhaber found that the most supportive pedagogies were meaning-based, and provided explicit instruction on concepts about print that were contextualized within purposeful reading and writing activities.⁴⁶ A multidimensional focus on language and literacy practices rather than knowledge alone, may allow educators to make learning more purposeful and connected to students’ everyday lives. By leveraging ELs’ assets and resources such as their knowledge of language and how it works, prior knowledge about topics, as well as their interest and motivation,⁴⁷ educators can help students engage more deeply and successfully in literacy practices that are essential to their academic success. As Bunch et al. explain, “Language development and cognitive development are interrelated and mutually dependent; ELs learn language as they learn content”.⁴⁸ Instead of addressing language development through a linear approach that results in sequential teaching of “bits and pieces” of language,⁴⁹ education leaders are beginning to seek curriculum and materials that address the interconnectedness of language and content learning.⁵⁰ This also serves as a reminder that we cannot wait for students to sound like “native” speakers of “standard” English before engaging in grade-level tasks with their peers.⁵¹

Once engaged in meaningful and authentic action within a community of learners, children’s language will further develop through what is conceptualized as apprenticeship.⁵² Apprenticeship in the classroom is the process of gradually developing expertise through guidance from and participation in a learning community,

37. Atkinson, 2011; Duff & Talmy, 2011; Cook & Wei, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2017

38. Bunch et al., 2012

39. Heath, 1983

40. Valdés, et al., 2005, p. 1

41. Valdés, et al., 2005; Flores & Rosa, 2015; McSwan, 2020

42. Valdés, et al., 2005, p. 40

43. Flores & Rosa, 2017; McSwan, 2020

44. Valdés, et al., 2005; Understanding Language, 2013; Heritage, et. al., 2020

45. Kibler et al., 2015, p. 16

46. Williams and Lowrance-Faulhaber, 2018

47. Bernhardt, 2011; Castellón, Cheuk, Greene, Mercado-Garcia, Santos, Skarin and Zerkel, 2015; Kibler et. al. 2015

48. Bunch et al. 2012, p. 2

49. Valdés, 2018a

50. Kibler et al., 2015; Heritage, et. al, 2020; Walqui & Bunch, 2020

51. Bunch et al., 2015

52. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Heritage, et. al, 2020; Walqui & Bunch, 2020



while engaged in activities that challenge individuals as they work toward independence.⁵³ Through apprenticeship, teachers and other students can support ELs to accomplish tasks and develop the language and literacy practices called for in the college- and career-ready standards.⁵⁴ Apprenticeship takes place in a learning environment where students feel safe and thus are willing to take risks and make approximations.⁵⁵ Interaction and apprenticeship provide opportunities for children to not only learn about the world, but how to be among each other. Designing learning in such a way must be done thoughtfully as it both shapes and is shaped by those who participate in it, and relationships become as important as the work in which children are engaged.⁵⁶

We have highlighted four foundational principles that undergird the contents of this paper. How these principles connect to action at different levels and within a variety of systems will determine whether or not students labeled as ELs are able to develop to their full potential. Next, we will address the current research on instructional practice that embody these principles. This will serve as a guide for stakeholders as they strive to create learning environments grounded in current research.

Instructional Practices for ELs' Language and Literacy Development in ELA

Stakeholders at all levels must think seriously about how to create environments rich in teacher collaboration and inquiry that support practitioners to be dynamic, creative, reflective, and generative thinkers, and who have the autonomy and expertise to confidently organize their classrooms and adapt their practices to engage and inspire each child as a unique learner. As noted in the EL Coalition's Statement, teachers have a responsibility to employ "well-designed formative assessment processes and assessments that simultaneously provide actionable information about both content knowledge and language development, and informs instruction day to day and in the moment." Research suggests that, in general, practices found to be effective for early literacy instruction (such as approaches that explicitly support phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, and reading vocabulary) are also effective for ELs, but that ELs require additional considerations.⁵⁷ While some of the instructional practices at the elementary level are also relevant for middle and high school ELs, literacy instruction for older ELs should consider literacy in a student's home language(s) and the literacies needed to engage across disciplines.⁵⁸ Based upon the research reviewed, the following six practices show promise in supporting the language and literacy development of ELs across age groups in ELA contexts:

- Sharing responsibility for EL development
- Integrating content and language to engage in ELA disciplinary practices
- Providing amplified (rather than simplified) access to grade-level content
- Engaging in cycles of formative assessment
- Drawing thoughtful attention to language in the context of disciplinary practices
- Carefully designing peer interactions

Sharing Responsibility

Bunch et al. notes that shared responsibility for English learners is not limited to teachers across disciplines but also includes "curriculum developers, textbook writers, assessment specialists, teacher educators, administrators, researchers, policymakers, and others".⁵⁹ Each plays an important role in creating an optimal learning environment for English learners, as each must consider the unique needs of the learners while integrating research-backed materials, practices, and policies. Publishers and curriculum developers should be held to account as being part of the effective teaching and learning ecology. Well-designed curriculum that is culturally and linguistically inclusive will be an essential foundation in supporting practitioners moving forward. Materials should be developed in collaboration with experienced content teachers and specialists, and with their shared responsibility for this work in mind. In addition, flexible scaffolds should be built into grade-level literacy materials in order to facilitate student comprehension. These scaffolds must support educators in amplifying grade-level content through the use of metacognitive strategies, among other

53. Walqui & van Lier, 2010; Bunch, et al. 2012; Kibler et al., 2015

54. Walqui & van Lier, 2010; Bunch, Walqui & Kibler, 2015

55. Heritage, et. al, 2020

56. Bruner, 1996

57. August, Shanahan and Escamilla, 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Shanahan & Beck, 2006

58. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

59. Bunch et al. 2012, p. 8



approaches, while drawing thoughtful attention to language within the context of meaningful work.⁶⁰ Curriculum should be purposeful: drawing upon students' lived experiences, interests, and unique assets as a foundation;⁶¹ supporting practitioners in designing responsive cycles of formative assessment;⁶² incorporating frequent opportunities for student collaboration;⁶³ and providing guidance for teachers to create the context for agentive learning. In addition, reading materials should play a substantial role in engaging children, both through providing culturally sustaining and relevant content, as well as being available in variety and abundance.⁶⁴ While high-quality materials are of utmost importance in this work, educators are a most vital element in the success of our education system. We must look closely at the complex challenges they face each day and prepare them for generative thinking and adaptation well beyond the simple implementation of a curriculum.

Building capacity across classrooms will require teachers to make complex innovations to their practice, and the collaboration of educators across subject areas and specializations is essential.⁶⁵ Deeper understanding of language and literacy develops over time as content area teachers collaborate with language specialists and engage in focused, classroom-based inquiry.⁶⁶ Case studies of districts and schools that have demonstrated positive results working with ELs show that they invest in ongoing teacher collaboration and professional development, with a shared commitment to the success of all students.⁶⁷ Motha called for a movement towards a redefinition of the teaching of all children, regardless of their language background, as the social responsibility of every teacher.⁶⁸ One of the keys to school success with ELs, noted in *Schools to Learn From*,⁶⁹ was this sense of shared responsibility for student success. As many recognize the importance of shared responsibility for the instruction of English learners and understand that language develops through meaningful action, many districts are moving away from pull-out programs that isolate students and their language practices to instead integrate opportunities for language development into mainstream content instruction.⁷⁰ Moving towards co-teaching and coaching models to leverage the collaboration and expertise of content area teachers and language specialists is creating new possibilities for inclusive and responsive instruction.⁷¹

Integrating Content and Language

In the context of ELA, researchers now understand that disciplinary and language practices are inextricably linked.⁷² Disciplinary practices are defined by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as the “activities in which students and teachers engage to construct knowledge, concepts, and skills in particular subject areas.”⁷³ Language practices are a combination of communicative acts (e.g., saying, writing, doing, and being) used to exchange ideas, concepts, and information.⁷⁴ They may be shared across content areas, but are often intertwined with the very conceptual understandings, disciplinary practices, and analytical tasks required to engage in a subject like language arts.⁷⁵ Accordingly, educators must embrace the reality that language develops through content learning rather than independently as its own content.⁷⁶ Several experimental studies focused on the positive outcomes of concurrently teaching language and content utilized content-focused activities that integrated opportunities for language and literacy development. Activities might include small group discussion, questioning routines, thinking tools, and metacognitive strategies to help students interpret texts and express their own thinking.⁷⁷ Drawing from commonalities across case studies, Castellón et al. recommend that schools “develop strong and unified language development frameworks that integrate content, analytical practices, literacy skills development, and language learning.”⁷⁸ One of the schools studied by Castellón and colleagues serves as an example in which ELs received contextualized

60. Understanding Language, 2013; Heritage et al. 2020; Walqui & Bunch, 2020

61. Castellón et al., 2015

62. Llosa, 2011

63. Cohen & Lotan, 2014

64. Duke, 2000; Guthrie, 2004; Walqui & Bunch, 2020

65. Bunch et al., 2012; Valdés, et al., 2014

66. Faltis & Valdés, 2016

67. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

68. Motha, 2006

69. Castellón et al. 2015

70. Valdés, et al., 2014

71. Baecher & Bell, 2011; Valdés, et al., 2014; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt, 2015; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019

72. Heritage, et. al, 2020; Valdés et al, 2014; Walqui & Bunch, 2020

73. CCSSO, 2012, p. 1

74. Ibid.

75. Valdés, Kibler & Walqui, 2014

76. Valdés et al., 2014

77. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

78. Castellón et al., 2015, p. 219



support for learning language, and language and literacy goals were aspects of all content courses. The schools also provided professional development for teachers on how to integrate language and content.⁷⁹ Though all teachers may not need to become language experts, they will need to seek collaboration with students, families, and specialists in order to address the comprehensive needs of their students.

Providing Amplified Access to Grade-Level Content

Through careful attention and planning, English learners can be challenged and supported as they engage with the same complex ELA texts and grapple with the same concepts as their monolingual peers working toward grade-level standards.⁸⁰ As ELs are developing their expertise in English, they must simultaneously develop content knowledge and disciplinary practices such as critical thinking, question posing, and argumentation.⁸¹ Research suggests that even young EL writers are able to critically examine text and evaluate its effectiveness.⁸² To do so, students need not only access to grade-level content, materials, and complex texts, but also instructional support to engage with them and meet the same academic goals as their peers.⁸³ Instead of simplification of text, students need multiple exposures, opportunities, and modalities to support their comprehension of increasingly sophisticated grade-level texts in.⁸⁴ Walqui & van Lier refer to these processes and texts as *amplified* and describe how scaffolding can be incorporated into the text itself or provided through instructional activities.⁸⁵ Supports such as glossaries, visual cues, metacognitive strategies, and attention to vocabulary can serve to amplify text and help ELs engage in grade-level tasks.⁸⁶ Additionally, teachers can promote engagement across multiple modalities, utilize instructional tools such as videos, visuals, and graphic organizers, draw attention to text structures, and define vocabulary in context.⁸⁷ In the older grades, supports are often in the form of probing questions, extended discussions, and opportunities to engage with peers to interpret the meaning of text.⁸⁸ In addition, insufficient attention has been given to the role of literacy engagement for ELs, as research reveals that it can be a means for overcoming considerable odds.⁸⁹ Studies find that the amount of time and choice students have each day to read from an abundance of interesting books and materials can have a significant impact on whether they are highly engaged readers, subsequently influencing their outcomes on a number of levels.⁹⁰ With that being said, there is a longstanding need to question the texts that appear in our classrooms and ensure that they reflect the lived experiences and realities of diverse student populations, and provide all children with a sense that they are seen and belong. Research on growth mindset also suggests that students are more engaged in reading and learning when they recognize that their own comprehension can be supported through strategic effort.⁹¹

Engaging in Cycles of Formative Assessment

In order to deftly guide students through grade-level literacy tasks, ELA teachers of English learners must be careful observers, continually monitoring their students' engagement, language production, and conceptual development.⁹² Castellón et al. note that schools effective in educating ELs use formative assessment practices to inform instruction.⁹³ Formative assessments yield information that help students develop independence as agents of their own learning, while supporting teachers to modify instruction in response to students' individual and collective needs.⁹⁴ Bunch et al. insist that "attending to students' developing and evolving language must be done thoughtfully and deliberately, in the midst of engagement with substantive and generative ELA learning activities designed to foster language, literacy, and academic development."⁹⁵ For example, Briceño and Klein completed a study and designed a tool to help teachers using running records to distinguish between language-related errors and traditional reading errors.⁹⁶ Writing samples can also be used as formative assessments as they reveal much about students' literacy development as well as how they

79. Ibid.

80. Bunch et al., 2012; Guzman-Orth et al., 2019; Valdés et al., 2005

81. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

82. Ortmeier-Hooper, Wight and McCullough, 2016

83. Bunch et al., 2012; Kibler et al., 2015

84. Bunch et al., 2015; Kibler et al., 2015

85. Walqui & van Lier, 2010

86. Kibler et al., 2015; Guzman-Orth et al., 2019

87. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

88. Understanding Language, 2013; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

89. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

90. Duke, 2000; Guthrie, 2004

91. Dweck, 2008; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

92. Understanding Language, 2013

93. Castellón et al., 2015

94. Llosa, 2011

95. Bunch et al., 2015, p. 8

96. Briceño and Klein, 2019



are understanding and using language.⁹⁷ Project and performance-based assessments can allow students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do in more authentic ways. Approaching tasks and assessments with a language-aware lens also helps teachers to intentionally plan, design, and scaffold instruction to move students forward in accomplishing increasingly sophisticated work.⁹⁸

Scaffolds designed through formative assessment provide targeted assistance to guide students and build their autonomy.⁹⁹ As Kibler et al. note, “scaffolding begins where the student currently is, and it both builds and accelerates development”.¹⁰⁰ For example, a text may be beyond a student’s comprehension level while reading on their own, but through carefully designed reading with peers, while utilizing strategies to make sense of the text, recognizing what they do and do not understand and what they can do about it, EL students can tolerate some ambiguity while learning to make inferences and become more accurate guessers.¹⁰¹ Appropriate scaffolds are based on teachers’ knowledge of students and their observations of what students are able to do. Scaffolding rather than the use of simplified materials ensures that all students access the same rigorous content and address grade-level standards.¹⁰² Scaffolding should only be used in response to student need, however, and should be removed or modified when no longer necessary.¹⁰³ This may occur naturally as educators engage in continuous cycles of formative assessment to support student autonomy, but time for collaboration, professional development, and classroom-based inquiry should be set aside in order to do this well and authentically.

Drawing Thoughtful Attention to Language

As language develops through meaningful action in social contexts rather than atomistically through the acquisition of a discrete progression of rules, we must think carefully about the role of grammar instruction and correctness in schools. ELA educators often wonder how and when to correct students’ language production. Supporting this understanding is Larsen-Freeman’s definition of grammar as a “by-product of a communication process”; in other words, “It is not a collection of rules and target forms to be acquired by language learners...it is about doing: participating in social experiences.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, if we understand language as action and social interaction, structures and forms of language must be understood and identified in the context of their communicative function.

Bunch et al., Kibler et al., and Valdés, among others, all argue that teaching discrete features of a second language (e.g. verb tenses, grammatical structures, vocabulary) in isolation may lead to improved performance on specific tasks, but there is little evidence that those elements transfer to use in authentic communication.¹⁰⁵ It is also essential to note that English learners can meet CCSS standards without “native-like” proficiency or “control of conventions and vocabulary” in oral or written forms.¹⁰⁶ In relation to reading, overemphasis on accuracy for ELs is not necessarily appropriate and can be detrimental to comprehension.¹⁰⁷ The CCSS also acknowledge that “language is at least as much a matter of craft as of rules.”¹⁰⁸ Since there is little empirical evidence supporting the teaching of language as “bits and pieces”,¹⁰⁹ instruction should focus on teaching students to attend to language and be aware of their own language use in order to adapt it for function, purpose and disciplinary practice. Since language development is nonlinear,¹¹⁰ attention to specific features should be responsive to and contextualized in the task at hand.

Carefully Designing Peer Interactions

Providing many flexible and meaningful opportunities for students to negotiate and construct meaning from text with each other builds not only language but comprehension.¹¹¹ Research suggests that giving students ample opportunities to talk and write together increases their reading comprehension.¹¹² Likewise,

97. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

98. Kibler et al. 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

99. Heritage et al. 2020; Understanding Language, 2013

100. Kibler et al., 2015, p. 22

101. Ibid.

102. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

103. Bunch et al., 2015

104. Larsen-Freeman’s, 2002, p. 42

105. Bunch et al., 2012; Kibler et al., 2015; Valdés, 2011

106. CCSS, 2010, p. 6

107. Briceño & Klein, 2019

108. NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 51

109. Valdés et al., 2011, Valdés, 2019

110. Larsen-Freeman, 2017

111. Bunch et al., 2015; Kibler et al., 2015; Walqui & van Lier, 2010

112. August et al. 2009; Shanahan & Beck 2006



engagement in peer discussion has also helped students bridge oral language to written tasks.¹¹³ As noted in a previous section, language develops through a process of apprenticeship, practice, and appropriation of aspects of language not yet acquired. Students developing literacy work with each other and their teacher to engage with increasingly complex texts to analyze, comprehend and interpret meaning. In the context of peer and class discussion, students pose and answer questions, clarify ideas, and co-construct understanding. Bauer, Presiado and Colomer found that children benefited from each other's language resources and that strategic partnerships supported early writing as students moved from oral storytelling to detailed written accounts through collaboration and metalinguistic awareness (or understanding of their own language use).¹¹⁴ An important aspect of these opportunities is the benefit of working with peers. Paired work has also been shown to improve writing and reading fluency for ELs.¹¹⁵ In addition, studies have found that students provide each other with more feedback and produce quantitatively more output when working with peers than through interactions with a teacher.¹¹⁶ Students also help each other comprehend text and modify their own understandings based on feedback.¹¹⁷

Such peer-to-peer interactions do not happen automatically and opportunities must be structured so that interactions are equitable, English learners can participate both as listeners and as producers of language, and all students learn to respectfully negotiate both social and linguistic status. As Kibler et al. show, the nature of peer relationships matter: EL-classified students' peer social networks impact both classroom processes and learning.¹¹⁸ For example, in heterogeneous middle-school ELA classes, ELs participated more actively, displayed greater social comfort, and held more validated public personas in those classrooms where students' peer social networks were more linguistically integrated, in that they included both EL and non-EL students.¹¹⁹ When EL students were part of linguistically integrated peer networks, their oral language growth improved, and all students (EL and non-EL alike) experienced relative gains in participation and learning.¹²⁰ To support positive peer dynamics, Kibler et al.'s mixed methods research points to the importance of teachers forming social connections with students, praising or validating students, facilitating interactive peer learning, providing proactive behavioral support, and addressing discrimination and diversity.¹²¹ Further, Lotan's study suggests that teachers can deal with problems arising from unequal participation by teaching students how to be linguistic resources for each other.¹²² Actively cultivating learning environments that are more intentionally inclusive and collaborative serves to benefit monolingual English speakers academically,¹²³ socially, and emotionally, as they gain insight into the valuable knowledge and perspectives of their multilingual peers.

Peer interaction needs to be designed thoughtfully and intentionally to consider students' language and academic needs and assets, as well as social dynamics and social status.¹²⁴ Classroom routines and activities must provide thoughtful and frequent opportunities for English learners to engage with their peers.¹²⁵ Carefully designed student collaboration also relieves teachers from potentially assuming the burden as sole experts in content and language, while recognizing students as models for each other, and providing opportunities for students to explore language in meaningful action, and in ways that will be transferable over time.¹²⁶

Conclusion

The Coalition for English Learner Equity Statement of Agreement and this accompanying whitepaper establish a common vision from which all stakeholders can work to ensure that policies, instructional practices, and materials lead to more equitable outcomes for English learners. Each stakeholder plays a part in the learning ecosystem to bring about that equity. Scholars and researchers must help ensure that there is sound educational theory on which to base language and literacy programs. Leaders and content developers must design well-balanced professional development and materials to support educators to implement

113. Lotan, 2008

114. Bauer, Presiado and Colomer, 2017

115. Shanahan & Beck 2006

116. Sato & Ballinger, 2016

117. Fujii, Ziegler & Mackey, 2016

118. Kibler et al., 2019; in press

119. Kibler et al., in press

120. Molloy Elreda et al., 2020

121. Kibler et al., 2019

122. Lotan, 2008

123. Molloy Elreda et al., 2020

124. Lotan, 2008

125. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017

126. Bunch et al., 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017



linguistic and culturally-sustaining practices. School and district leaders must choose program models, professional development, and curriculum that acknowledge and build on the assets of students and their communities. Practitioners are charged with bringing this all together to provide students with meaningful access to grade-level content, evidenced-based instruction, and regular formative assessment. In addition, successful schools in the U.S. will need to provide comprehensive support networks that attend holistically to students' developmental and socioemotional wellbeing. Educators must seek innovative ways to build strong partnerships with families in order to improve the impact they have on students and their communities. All of this requires a substantial investment of time, energy, and money in order to provide both communities and schools with the resources they need to realize their greatest potential. Students will need sufficient time and resources to develop agency, identity, and ownership of their lives and in their communities. Schools and districts must establish and demand system policies that truly recognize students' identities, wellbeing, interests, aspirations, and needs. It is up to policy makers to provide schools with the resources necessary to ensure that all of these systems are effectively implemented and intelligently evaluated. A reminder of our legal obligation from *Casteñeda v. Picard* (1981) is that we must serve English learners with programs (1) based on sound educational theory, (2) effectively implemented with sufficient resources and personnel, and (3) regularly evaluated to determine effectiveness. Nearly fifty years ago we embarked on the promise of ensuring educational equity for students classified as English learners (ELs) in the U.S.. It is time to deliver on that promise.

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