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Language Instruction

EDITOR'S NOTE

Language instruction is continuously evolving to better support English-language learners (ELL's). This Spotlight will help you identify potential learning gaps heightened by the pandemic; learn best practices for strengthening literacy skills in your schools; discover strategies for personalized language instruction; gain insights into the future of education for ELL students; begin to understand the challenges facing ELL's and their teachers; and more.

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— Getty

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Virtual Learning Made Persistent Problems Worse for English-Learners

By Ileana Najarro

Bit by bit researchers continue to piece together how virtual learning impacted English-language learners' education, from limiting vital in-person interactions with teachers and peers to leaving some without a robust support system at home.

A new report from the Government Accountability Office released in May found that teachers who were teaching in a virtual environment with at least 20 percent English-learners reported that their students "struggled with understanding lessons and completing assignments, having an appropriate workspace, accessing school meals, and getting assistance at their workspace."

The findings are based on a nationally representative survey of elementary and secondary public school teachers conducted last summer. The report is part of a series from the GAO looking at how learning through the pandemic has played out for students both in

“I think [the pandemic] really just exacerbated and made more obvious gaps that researchers have known for years.”

JACQUELINE NOWICKI

Director of K-12 education,
Government Accountability Office

terms of the obstacles they have faced and best practices to support students moving forward.

A 2020 report from the agency, for example, found that when schools turned to virtual learning early in the pandemic, English-learners lost access to learning and resources, such

as not having reliable internet access at home to log in for classes, and more broadly lost access to peers and teachers who could help with language development.

Yet researchers including Jacqueline Nowicki, director of K-12 education for the federal agency, said many of the challenges English-learners experienced in virtual learning aren't new—and neither are their solutions.

"I think [the pandemic] really just exacerbated and made more obvious gaps that researchers have known for years," Nowicki said.

Pre-pandemic issues under the spotlight

Some of the GAO findings include:

- Elementary school teachers with a high percentage of English-learners were at least three times more likely than other elementary school teachers to report their students regularly lacked an appropriate workspace at home.
- Middle school teachers with a high percentage of English-learners were about six times more likely than other middle school teachers to report their students regularly had difficulty understanding lessons.
- Middle school teachers with a high percentage of English-learners were about six times more likely than other middle school teachers to report their students regularly had difficulty completing class assignments.
- Teachers with a large number of students who received free or reduced-priced meals also reported similar disparities.

The findings complement other researchers' insights about virtual instruction for English-learners in particular—some the function of longstanding issues.

The lack of preparation that general education teachers receive to support English-learners in their classroom was an issue pre-pandemic that was showcased more clearly in virtual learning, said Amaya Garcia, deputy director of Pre-K-12 education at the think tank New America.

Garcia and Leslie Villegas, senior policy analyst with the Education Policy program at New America, wrote a report released in April based on interviews with 20 English-learner advocates, experts, and researchers. They

Honor Students' Heritage to Accelerate Their Learning



When students see themselves represented in the curriculum, they become more engaged with the content and are more likely to succeed. For Emergent Bilinguals and multilingual students, it's important for content to not only acknowledge but also celebrate their cultural and linguistic diversity.

To achieve inclusivity and to help your students become confident speakers, effective language acquisition programs combine:

- An asset-based approach that honors students' cultures
- Self-paced learning accessible from anywhere
- Ample practice speaking and listening to English
- Personalized instruction based on real-time data



Create a safe, non-judgmental environment that builds students' confidence as they learn academic English. Here's how:

Support Multilingual Students

looked at everything from how identification of English-learner students to funding was impacted by the pandemic.

Younger students got less direct English instruction overall due to educators limiting screen time, they found. Older students lost opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers. Virtual learning didn't allow for the usual visual aids, like charts and diagrams, students might have seen in the physical classroom.

Garcia and Villegas fear that now educators will be focused on catching students up and on what students weren't able to learn during virtual instruction instead of thinking about what they did learn and how to use that to fill in gaps in understanding and language development.

Research shows how strengthening a home language can facilitate English language development, and some English-learners were able to make gains in language development while attending school virtually. But "our education system is not really prepared to assess those gains in those home languages," Villegas said.

Strategies for success aren't new

For now, strategies to better support students going forward are rooted in practices that were successful before the pandemic.

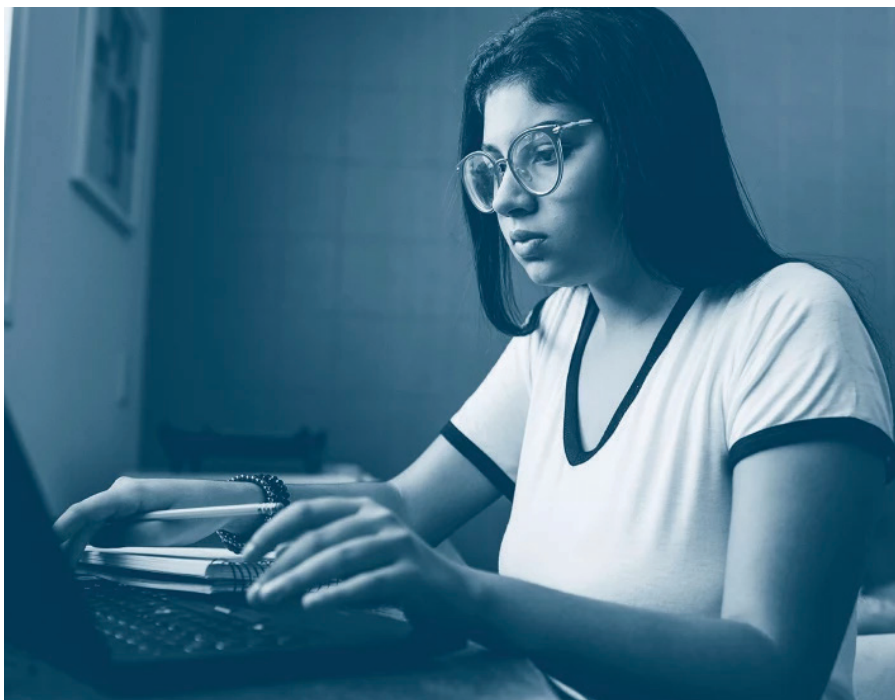
The GAO report, for instance, found that one-on-one check-ins between teachers and students, and small group work in person were successful strategies teachers used to help students stay on track academically.

Schools, districts, and school networks that were better able to meet students' needs through virtual learning already had strong communication and engagement plans and strategies with parents and families, Villegas said.

"I think that moving forward making sure that that continues to be a priority across schools is one of the big opportunities here," Villegas said.

And while COVID-19 federal relief funds for schools are being used to buy more products such as software and headphones for English-learners, Garcia said there's an opportunity to better ensure students are well supported by instead investing in human capital such as bilingual counselors, home-school liaisons, teachers, and more.

"As districts continue to think about ways to invest these ESSER funds, I think that there needs to be some consideration of how to create more holistic supports and systems to serve [English-learners]," Garcia said. ■



— Getty/Igor Alexander

Published January 4, 2022

Essential Practices for Building Literacy In Older English-Learners

By Catherine Gewertz

Teaching literacy to older students who are still learning English is a topic that's traditionally gotten less attention—in research, training, and professional development—than its counterpart for younger students.

But the stakes are high for the nation's 1.9 million secondary English-learners: They're building English-literacy skills just as the types of reading and writing they must do get tougher. And they have less time left in school than K-5 students; these years are crucial for building the English proficiency that will support their later work and education trajectories.

Experts caution that good literacy instruction must be built on what's already known about best practice for adolescent literacy in general, and be grounded in teachers' detailed understanding of their students, since the English-learner population is highly diverse: Some are immigrants, but most were born in the United States. Some have had years of formal ed-

ucation and others hardly any. They vary widely in English proficiency. But key guiding principles and practices have emerged from research, and from classrooms, for teaching adolescent English-learners.

Engagement is paramount

Teachers already know how crucial it is—and how challenging it can be—to get students engaged in their work. But engagement is even more important for adolescents, since they're at a delicate crossroads: Exploring their identities and the social world around them, they're more likely to feel their schoolwork is boring and irrelevant. And that's happening just as the texts they must read are more complex.

"These are young adults. It can't be just kids lined up in rows with teachers lecturing," said Lydia Acosta Stephens, who oversees multilingual and multicultural instruction in the Los Angeles Unified school district. "There has to be conversation, dialogue, discussion."

Combine the needs of adolescents with the challenge of learning English, and it be-

comes even more important to find ways to grab and hold students' attention, experts say.

"Learning another language can be exhausting. Kids are doing double the work: content and language," said Steven Weiss, a coach at Stanford University's Center to Support Excellence in Teaching, which helps schools support their multilingual students. "If the cognitive load is that high, and you don't make it enticing, they'll check out."

David Francis, a University of Houston professor who's leading one of two federally funded teams that are researching instructional strategies for adolescent English-learners, said it's crucial to choose topics that appeal to middle and high school students, such as relationships, health, climate change, and immigration.

Using an instructional approach that features a lot of small-group discussion also boosts the chances that students will be actively engaged while they build content knowledge and literacy skills, he said.

'Charming' and 'enticing' students

Aída Walqui, a senior research scientist at WestEd who's leading the other federally funded research team, offers an example of a set of language arts lessons she and her colleagues developed to use with 8th grade Los Angeles students. They were built on the idea of "charming" students with a topic—and discussion techniques—that are highly relevant and engaging, she said. With strategically embedded supports, students will learn content while developing the full suite of literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In a series of lessons that spans several weeks, students explore the history of murals, study the Mexican muralist movement, and focus deeply on a mural by famed painter Diego Rivera. They expand their focus to murals in their own neighborhoods and to street arts such as graffiti. Students discuss the pieces with partners or in small groups, considering questions such as how public art expresses people's concerns.

Toward the end of the unit, teachers invite students to reflect on how their ideas about mural art changed during the unit study and why. Then they must write proposals for public-art projects and defend them in presentations to the class. Teachers support the process with explicit instruction on argumentation, including recurring phrases in English that help develop an argument.

That kind of approach blends key aims, Walqui said: It builds students' conceptual understanding at the same time it develops their

analytical processes and literacy skills. And it grounds the instruction in something adolescent English-learners can identify with, she said.

"Students have to recognize themselves in what they're doing," she said. "And then, based on those deep experiences, you invite them further into the unknown."

Assure access to grade-level content and texts

Teachers can support the literacy development of all adolescent students—including English-learners—by infusing it into content-area instruction, experts say.

"There is no language without content," Francis said. "They're inseparable."

Building background knowledge, too, is known to be pivotal to strong reading skills.

To build both the background knowledge and literacy skills they need, English-learners must have consistent access to grade-level content and texts, experts say. Teachers can use a range of strategies to do that, such as breaking down a text into essential ideas, Francis said.

Visual supports are particularly important to help English-learners understand what they're reading, so experts suggest that teachers make use of illustrations, graphic organizers, and multimedia. Language supports, such as glossaries, can aid understanding as well.

Paul Hernandez, a social studies teacher in Sanger Unified, a district in California's Central Valley that has drawn notice for its work with English-learners, uses a graphic organizer called the Frayer model to help his 11th graders—a blend of native-English speakers and English-learners—explore the meanings of words they encounter.

He blends speaking, writing, and reading strategies to help students build their language muscles. In a recent unit on U.S. migration patterns of the 1920s, students read paragraphs aloud, highlighting important ideas and putting question marks next to unknown words or concepts. Those exercises help students participate in class and group discussion. And Hernandez finds that they help his native-English speakers, too, "especially in this year of lost learning, when everyone needs more support."

Building access points to complex material

Diane August, a longtime researcher and adviser on English-learners, suggests a range of scaffolding strategies to help students access

text and build literacy skills. Teachers could put students in pairs or groups, blending native speakers with those still learning English if possible, and they could read small chunks of text together. Each group could be assigned to gather information needed for a whole-class discussion. This kind of approach can help both English-learners and native speakers build literacy skills, August said.

August also suggests teaching a set of academic vocabulary words intensively over several days. In a science lesson being developed for the University of Houston-led grant, 7th graders explore how animals adapt to their surroundings. The lesson focuses on a chunk of informational text and provides the definition of "adapt" in English and Spanish, with picture cards to reinforce the ideas, including one of a lizard changing color to match a tree. It invites students to talk with a partner about how they'd adapt to cold weather and uses multiple modalities, including a video about a flamingo's habitat, stopping at key points to dive deeper. Words like "optimal" and "predators" are explained in glossaries in the margins.

Teachers working on that lesson will use three levels of scaffolding: For students least proficient in English, they'll supply "response frames," or paragraphs in which students fill in specific words. For those with intermediate proficiency, teachers will offer only "sentence starters," such as, "There are few predators because ..." For those most proficient, and native-English speakers, teachers will pose questions without either of those supports.

Ground practice on detailed, individual knowledge of students

Experts advise teachers to make use of the rich data set available on their English-learners. Annual proficiency-test results, periodic screenings, and formative-assessment strategies all can yield important clues to what kinds of support students need. Many teachers don't look at these data or even know which of their students are English-learners, August said.

Acosta Stephens of Los Angeles Unified urged teachers to immerse themselves in the language-proficiency data about their students and to spend time talking with them and jotting notes about their language skills. Viewing students' native languages as an asset, too, is crucial.

"All these things can be used to determine not just where a student is weak but where they are strong," Stephens said.

It's a point echoed by many experts: Teachers must view students' home language-

es as strengths rather than obstacles, and they must work to support those native languages even as they're building skills in English. It's important to understand students' levels of literacy in their original languages, since those foundations are building blocks for learning a new language.

As a 2017 national report on English-learners points out, students already carry the “underlying neural architecture” of language, and many skills transfer as they learn English. Speakers of Romance languages, for instance, can draw on the many cognates—words with similar derivations and sounds—shared by their native and new languages.

Systemwide policies and concepts are needed for effective literacy instruction

To be successful, the teaching of literacy skills in English-learners needs a suite of its own supports: high-quality training and professional development to equip teachers with the right skills; a coherent, districtwide vision of the beliefs that undergird instruction; and what that instruction should look like, experts say.

“Too often, teachers are told to focus on the pieces,” said Weiss of Stanford. “It’s ‘focus on grammar!’ or ‘focus on vocabulary, oral language!’ It ends up being a Christmas tree approach to learning, with shiny baubles but no coherence. Teachers need real clarity at the district level: What should instruction look like for our ELLs? What do we mean by scaffolding? What do we mean by academic discourse? What does that look like in a classroom, and what implications does it have for curriculum?”

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic gives districts a unique chance to rebuild their approach to English-learners, Weiss said.

“Let’s not go back to normal,” he said. “Let’s rethink it, build a systematic approach to provide the supports ELLs need, and build on the assets they bring.” ■



— sesame/DigitalVision Vectors

Published November 2, 2021

The Complicated Picture of English-Language Learners' Progress During The Pandemic

By Ileana Najarro

The latest data on how English-learners around the country fared in their language development during the pandemic are out. But there’s a major catch: About 30 percent fewer students took a widely used standardized assessment in 2021 than did two years prior, making the data difficult to analyze over time.

Students also took the test at different points in the school year, with some taking it up to 15 months later than their peers in other places, according to a new report from the WIDA consortium that offers the online assessment. Thirty-six states, several United States territories, and agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Education use WIDA assessments, with nearly half of all English-learners nationally taking those tests.

While it’s tempting to look at the aggregate results, which show overall declines, particularly in speaking skills, and indicate that English-learners are worse off than they were before the pandemic, experts caution that the test results are skewed and have limited uses. The WIDA data problems are

indicative of a pervasive challenge educators and researchers are facing right now in trying to pin down student achievement across the subjects: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted assessments, leaving major asterisks on most data collection.

English-proficiency tests, offered by WIDA and others, are required by state and federal law for ELL students in kindergarten through 12th grade. They measure students’ English-proficiency in four domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and are used to determine if a student will remain in an English-learner program.

Because the WIDA test is generally given in the spring, schools were largely able to administer the 2020 assessment prior to shutdowns that year.

WIDA, one of the nation’s largest English-learner testing programs, required that its 2021 assessment be taken in person—even in places where students were still learning remotely. That move, stemming from concerns about the validity of a take-home test and students’ inability to access the internet, caused some uproar. Advocates claimed it was unfair and possibly dangerous to ask these students—most of whom are Latino,

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Asian, and Black—to go into school buildings with COVID-19 raging in their communities.

While the 2021 WIDA data show where test-takers were in terms of their language skills at the time of the test, experts say using the data to make assumptions about English-learners' proficiency and growth as a population is problematic.

"I would not use [2021] test data to say, 'Oh, this is where we're going as a nation,' other than to see if it aligns with something that we have some evidence of locally," said Kristina Robertson, the English-language-development program administrator at Roseville Area Schools in Minnesota.

Instead, the main value in the latest WIDA scores, experts say, is in considering them a starting point in assessing English-learners' language proficiency and growth during the pandemic.

There are major caveats in reviewing results

The 30 percent decline in English-learners taking the language assessment in 2021 raises a number of questions both in terms of students tested and those whose scores are missing.

For instance, the results may be rosier or worse off than the true results depending on whether the students who happened to be tested had higher or lower levels of language proficiency than those not tested, said Gary Cook, senior director of assessment at WIDA. This prevents an apples to apples comparison to both past and future aggregate results.

There are even concerns among state education agencies that the most vulnerable English-learners weren't tested, said Amaya Garcia, deputy director of preK-12 education at the think tank New America.

“

It's not a test that they need to graduate. And parents are sort of, like, why am I sending my kid to take this test when they're not even coming to school to learn?.”

KRISTINA ROBERTSON

English-language-development program administrator Roseville Area Schools in Minnesota

In the Roseville district there was a 17 percent drop in the number of English-learners taking the 2021 WIDA test from the year before, and that's despite outreach efforts such as providing transportation to school for the test during their remote learning year, said Robertson.

While she can't definitively say why these students didn't participate, she identified possible disconnects.

"It's not a test that they need to graduate. And parents are sort of, like, why am I sending my kid to take this test when they're not even coming to school to learn?" she said.

English-learner advocates in some states last year were pushing for parents to be able to opt-out of the in-person test, or for tests to be delayed due to COVID safety concerns. The federal government encouraged this testing to proceed in 2021, even if it meant extending the testing window.

School closures forced some schools to administer the test well into the current academic year as opposed to the traditional spring testing window, Cook said, possibly giving some students more time than others to develop their language skills before being assessed.

Robertson said bringing students into school buildings may also have affected their performance. Many students who had been stuck at home for remote learning were seeing their peers for the first time in a while on test day, which was likely exciting and distracting.

Even with the caveats in mind, the 2021 test results do have one potential use, said Derek Briggs, a University of Colorado Boulder professor and president of the National Council on Measurement in Education, whose members design and study K-12 assessments: They're a tool for helping figure out where individual students are with English proficiency, and what their needs are moving forward.

But because of the major changes in who got tested overall, you can't make inferences about English-learners as a population, even at a district level, he added.

What do we know from the results?

Amid all the caveats, aggregate student data from 2021 revealed an overall downward trend in language proficiency and growth compared to 2020 and 2019.

The pandemic's impact as seen in the 2021 scores varied by grade and each of the four language domains. There were relatively larger declines in speaking, according to WIDA's report, and in 1st and 6th grades.

Garcia, with New America, found it con-

“

Virtual learning didn't necessarily lend itself to a lot of speaking and practicing talking.”

AMAYA GARCIA

Deputy director of preK-12 education at the think tank New America

cerning that there were more declines in language growth in the younger years since there's the hope that children will become proficient early enough to exit out of an English-learner program by 4th grade to avoid the risk of becoming a long-term English-learner, who may end up stagnated academically.

And while Garcia was surprised that the decline in reading wasn't as big as in the other domains, opening up the question of how much reading was involved in virtual learning, the decline in speaking wasn't a shock.

"Virtual learning didn't necessarily lend itself to a lot of speaking and practicing talking," Garcia said.

While the return to in-person school itself can address the need for more opportunities to develop speaking skills, the decline is of note considering how key speaking is to learning a language overall, she added.

Educators should look at multiple factors

As Robertson's team in Minnesota reviews local English-learner assessment results, they're keeping in mind that students can do more in a classroom setting than they can in a standardized testing situation.

Standardized tests can't, for instance, track advances students make in their home languages, Robertson said. And the test results alone shouldn't be used to make assumptions on student progress.

"I just think there has to be a broader conversation about triangulation of data, how we look at the multiple factors that go into this," she said.

Robertson is also mindful of the continued outreach staff within her district are doing to determine how the pandemic impacted students beyond academics. She's aware, for instance, that there were several COVID-related deaths in their English-learner community. ■

Looking Ahead:

Ensuring Success for Emergent Bilinguals



The educational landscape has changed, which has given educators a unique opportunity: By asking the right questions and implementing plans today, they can future-proof their curricula against unforeseen interruptions and ensure continuity of learning, particularly for Emergent Bilingual students.

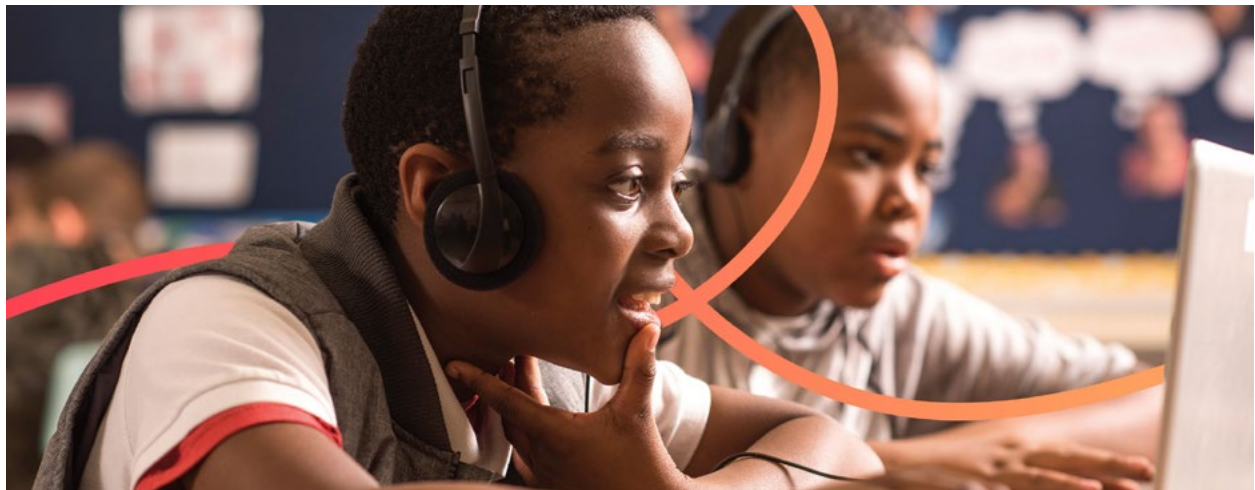
Start by asking:

- **What have we learned** since spring 2020?
- **What do we expect—and want—from** the future of education?
- **Where do Emergent Bilinguals need additional support**, and what tools can we invest in to provide it?
- **How can we make the education experience better** for both teachers and families moving forward?



Quick tip

While needs have changed, Emergent Bilinguals' inherent strengths remain. Taking a culturally sustaining approach that views cultural differences as assets will maximize these strengths.



3 Ways to Enhance Support for Emergent Bilinguals



“Now more than ever, we want to be sure our Emergent Bilinguals are engaged in the classroom,” says Cynthia Peng, manager of educational content at Lexia® Learning. Several strategies can be used achieve this.

1

Invest in proven learning sciences.

While commonly housed within literacy instruction, research shows language is best taught separately. Spoken language is the foundation for literacy. Using explicit and systematic language instruction builds familiarity and confidence for Emergent Bilinguals.

2

Give Emergent Bilinguals more speaking practice.

Get students talking. According to Kristie Shelley, senior director of Emergent Bilingual curriculum at Lexia, ***“The only way you learn a language is if you speak the language.”*** Daily practice, conversations with peers, and nonverbal feedback are all invaluable to language acquisition.

3

Improve teacher tools and resources.

The smart, intentional use of language acquisition programs can keep Emergent Bilinguals engaged. With Lexia® English Language Development™, for example, K–6 teachers use real-time data to inform instruction. This way, students can progress past concepts they’ve mastered or receive timely and targeted support before they become discouraged.



Quick tip

The language we use matters. Unlike other terms, “Emergent Bilingual” celebrates students’ bilingualism as an asset.

Maintaining Momentum for Emergent Bilinguals



One lesson from remote instruction is that learning can truly happen anywhere, including at home. Here, a student's family plays a key role in the continuity of learning.

Family members who feel included and represented in their child's education are more likely to encourage the child's learning from beyond the classroom. Taking a culturally sustaining approach allows educators to tap into the family's cultural capital and achieve inclusive, productive learning for Emergent Bilinguals.

An adaptive blended learning program like Lexia English applies a culturally sustaining lens, is designed to engage Emergent Bilinguals, and helps teachers personalize language instruction in real time.

With tools like this at educators' disposal, the concept of "lost learning time" can take a back seat as we focus even more on accelerating learning and optimizing instruction, regardless of where it happens.



Quick tip

Evaluate tools and resources by asking if they've thoughtfully integrated themes and perspectives from a variety of cultures and traditions.



Find out how your support for Emergent Bilinguals can be made future-ready.

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Published June 22, 2021

English-learners May Need More Support This Fall. But That Doesn't Mean They're Behind

By Ileana Najarro

The country's 5 million English-language learner-students—three-quarters of whom speak Spanish as their home language, federal data show—faced unique challenges during the periods of remote schooling last year. But, experts say, it's important to remember being immersed in their families' languages and cultures also offered some potential benefits for this group.

COVID-19 had a disproportionate negative impact on the nation's communities of color, including Hispanics, in terms of health and finances. And a federal government report from last year found that some English-learners had limited access to computers and the internet, complicating their remote learning experience.

While learning through screens, these students often found themselves with less time for casual conversations with their teachers and peers, causing some to worry their English skills might regress.

But as teachers plan out the next school year for English-learners, Amaya Garcia, deputy director of preK-12 education at the think tank New America said, there are ways to ensure these students are properly supported moving forward.

"We don't want kids to, because the teacher assumes that they lost a lot of English, end up in sort of this more remedial situation where they're trying to teach them English again in ways that aren't that effective," Garcia said. "We would want for that kid to be getting language-rich content, like learning language within the content, not learning language in sort of isolation where I'm sitting there teaching grammar and teaching you kind of the rules."

For this story, Education Week spoke with over a dozen instructional experts, teachers, coaches, and parents about what English-learners need next school year and how schools can support them. Representing their reflections and insights is "Ana," a composite English-learner returning to full-time in-person instruction in the fall.



“What they need is the scaffolding and the support to get them back where they once were, and to continue progressing.”

BARBARA LORA
English language acquisition coach

Where things stand for Ana

Ana was in 3rd grade working on improving her reading and writing in English when she suddenly found herself spending much more time in her mostly Spanish-speaking home. She no longer had the traditional opportunities to practice both academic and non-academic English as she normally would have on a school campus, where she could easily ask for help whenever she struggled with her reading, for instance. She also had to juggle classes with helping take care of her younger siblings.

Plus, her community was hit harder by the coronavirus' spread, with neighbors falling ill and some dying. Due to school closures and safety restrictions, she didn't take a formal language proficiency assessment in the spring of 2020.

But Ana did make important gains over her year at home: She picked up more advanced Spanish vocabulary from the time spent with her family, particularly when her grandmother would tell her stories in Spanish, and she mastered new technology tools.

As she steps into a new grade this fall, her teachers will have to sort out just how big an impact the remote setting had on her English-language proficiency progress, and how to incorporate the silver linings that emerged over the past year into their teaching plans.

What teachers of English-learners can do

To begin to address Ana's needs, experts and educators alike say the right mindset is key. Namely, her teachers shouldn't make assumptions on how much or how little she progressed in English.

Most importantly, they should not immediately jump to a remediation approach.

What English-learners "need is the scaffolding and the support to get them back where they once were, and to continue progressing," said Barbara Lora, an English-language acquisition coach in the bilingual department at the Brockton school district in Massachusetts.

Teachers should use what formal data are available—in some cases that will be assessment results from 2019. They should pair that with informal assessment results collected over the last year.

For instance, at the Center City public charter schools in Washington D.C., each English-learner gets an individualized plan. Teachers mark on a grid where the student is currently performing in each language domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and set goals for them. Teachers then design instruction based on the plan keeping in mind grade-level content and needed language-developmental structures, said Alicia Passante, ESL program manager for the school system.

But when sorting out how much catching up needs to be done for a student like Ana, instruction must still be rigorous. She should be exposed to all the same content as her grade-level peers.

Garcia, with New America, also points to summer, after-school, and tutoring programs as ways to boost English skills. Some of these programs are designed to continue what happens in the classroom and extend it. Group research and writing projects can give English-learners the chance to work together and learn more vocabulary.

The Dearborn public schools district in

Michigan, for instance, is running a “super summer school program” for K-12 grades, during which English-learners and others will get some re-teaching and some front-loading of academics for the next grade, but also an introduction back into a regular physical classroom environment, said Rose Aldubaily, director of EL and compensatory education for the district.

English-learners in particular need explicit supports where they use their language to process their understanding of a topic and learn from and with others, said Steven Weiss, senior researcher at Understanding Language-Center to Support Excellence in Teaching at Stanford University.

Jigsaw reading, for instance, can help. In that cooperative learning activity, small groups of students work together to each become an expert in one part of a topic, and then teach each other what they know.

Teachers should also spend some time assessing students like Ana holistically, both in terms of gains and losses made in the last year, with careful attention to proficiency in the student’s home language.

For instance, Angelica, a mother in San Antonio, Texas, who asked to only be identified by her first name, said that while her 8-year-old son still can’t read in English, she taught him to read in Spanish this past year after she quit her job to help her three children with remote learning. To find out what exactly happened last year in terms of home language learning for students, schools need to ensure parents like Angelica weigh in on what support students need.

Educators and experts alike emphasized how the stronger a student is in one language, the stronger they’ll be in another. But the considerations are different for newcomer English-learners who may lack proficiency even in their home language, as Maria Garcia, an EL teacher at Alice Deal Middle School in the District of Columbia has found. (Amaya and Maria Garcia, both quoted, are sisters.)

Her school has a fair number of newcomer Spanish-speaking students with low literacy rates in their native language, so it’s designing a new literacy intervention course that will be taught in Spanish for the fall, she said.

Newcomer students that came into school during the pandemic will likely face a culture shock in the fall. Last year, many were trying to navigate classes and get to know people through computers while speaking no English, she added. So teachers have to be deliberate in providing opportunities for them to build relationships at school.

For a full picture of a student’s performance over the last year, including an understanding

What teachers should expect...

- Students may be out of practice with academic and/or non-academic English
- Recent formal language assessment results may be unavailable
- Students may have improved their reading and vocabulary skills in their home language



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What teachers should focus on...

- Avoiding assumptions on how much or how little progress was made in English language skills
- Helping students learn language within content, not in isolation
- Assessing students holistically, including determining any gains made in home language



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SOURCE: Education Week reporting

Collage by Laura Baker/Education Week (Images: iStock/Getty, E+)

of major changes that happened in their home life, which plays into academic performance, schools will need to be diligent about reaching out to parents for their insight and help. Ana’s parents for instance, can share that Ana learned many new recipes while at home, so her teachers can relate measurements to other math learning, thereby incorporating her cultural learning in the classroom.

Insights for all teachers

In some cases, the pandemic exposed how little connection districts had with parents of English-learners.

Parents like Virginia Ramirez in Porterville, Calif., whose children were once in an English-learner program, urge schools to think about language barriers that may prevent parents from better advocating for their children’s needs and helping teachers contextualize their children’s progress. She added that it’s also on

parents to seek out resources for their children.

“All schools I think do an open house at the start of the year, so in that meeting they should tell parents it’s very important to go to meetings because they will learn this and that,” Ramirez said. “But it’s also very important they do it in two languages, Spanish and English, because many times it’s only in English, and as Latino parents we don’t know what they’re doing or saying, and we’re uninformed.”

Parents and educators spoke of how that bridge-building needs to continue throughout. Outreach examples can include translating school websites and all documents that get sent home.

Collaboration between general education teachers and specialized English-learner teachers that happened virtually in the past year should also continue to ensure proper support for the student.

And teachers should keep using technology that proved effective during remote learn-

ing when they're back this fall. Garcia at Alice Deal, for instance, enjoyed using an online platform where students could submit assignments and see her feedback, including whatever feedback she gave their peers: Students could learn from their classmates' work as well and it allowed her to emphasize revision and model learning as a work in progress.

But above all, educators and experts also hope schools can address student's social-emotional well-being, especially those who will re-

turn with trauma from losing loved ones to the virus, losing their homes, and the struggles associated with a remote and hybrid year of school.

At Alice Deal, for instance, students are put in an advisory with a teacher that speaks their native language whenever possible, to allow for more social-emotional supports.

Wellness checks should extend to students' families, said Lora of the Brockton district. She advises teachers to take the first few weeks of the transition into the new

school year to build relationships with English-learners' families.

"Once families trust you enough to have difficult conversations about what's going on at home—once you are humble, as an educator, enough to recognize that we're not in this by ourselves, and that we do need parents, even if they don't speak English, that we can't do this job by ourselves, that it is a village approach that we need—then everything else will sort of fall into place a little easier," Lora said. ■



OPINION

Published May 17, 2022

Crystal Ball Predictions: What Will Education For ELL Students Look Like in 10 Years?

By Larry Ferlazzo

The new question of the week is:

Please take out your crystal ball and make some predictions about English-language learners and U.S. schools 10 years from now. How many ELL students might there be? Will there be any particular changes in how they are taught or assessed, etc.?

The latest statistics (which are 2 to 3 years old) show that English-language learners comprised 10.4 percent of the K-12 student population and that 64 percent of all U.S. teachers have at least one

ELL in their classroom.

A few educated guesses of my own are that the ELL numbers could grow to 15 percent of the total population in 10 years and that at least 75 percent of all teachers could have at least one in their classroom.

Given those increases, I would hope that more and more schools and teachers begin to recognize what so many have already—that good ELL teaching is good teaching for everybody and that the engaging and accelerating instructional strategies used in ELL classrooms become more and more widespread in all classrooms.

Today's more detailed responses come from Michelle Abrego, Aisha Christa Atkinson, and Sarah Said.

More 'Equitable School Practices'

Michelle Abrego is an assistant professor in the Organization and School Leadership Department at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and the co-author of Engaging the Families of ELs and Immigrants: Ideas, Resources and Activities:

Schools in the United States are expected to become more linguistically diverse as the number of English-learners in schools rise over the next decade. Currently, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 1 in 10 students nationally is an EL. Projections regarding an increase in EL enrollment show a rise potentially to 20 percent of the overall student population.

Languages spoken by ELs will vary by region. Statistics from NCES identify the top home languages spoken by ELs. Currently, about 75 percent of the home language for English-learners is Spanish. Other top languages include Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Somali. Spanish will continue as the top home language; however, other home languages of ELs will surge.

Destinations for ELs will move beyond typical concentration in urban areas to many small towns and cities across the U.S. All schools should expect a shift in their student demographics and be prepared to engage in the discussion as to how to best meet the needs of their ELs. Additionally, schools must be prepared to engage families of ELs as partners in student learning.

Tensions and conflicts surrounding how to best educate ELs will continue over the next decade. However, there will be increased agreement regarding the value of producing students who are truly biliterate. Currently, over 40 states offer high school diplomas with a seal of biliteracy. The seal is awarded to students who have attained academic proficiency in two or more languages. It is expected that increased support for biliteracy will result in an increase in dual-language programming

for ELs. The United States Department of Education describes dual-language education programs as a type of bilingual education program in which students are taught literacy and academic content in English and a partner language. Such programs vary in structure.

An article in Education Week reports that 35 states offer dual-language programs in 18 languages. Most dual-language programs are for Spanish speakers. It remains to be seen if the linguistic diversity of dual-language programs offered will match the proportional increase of home languages spoken. For example, New America notes that although Arabic is the second fastest growing language behind Spanish, there are few dual-language offerings in Arabic.

Debates regarding the best instructional practices for ELs will continue with increased attention to new pedagogies. Alma Rodriguez and Sandra Musanti, professors of bilingual education at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, identify translanguaging as a major pedagogical paradigm shift occurring among bilingual educators. This pedagogy encourages educators to intentionally leverage and capitalize on students' full linguistic repertoire (across multiple languages). Translanguaging breaks away from designs in dual-language programs that keep languages separate and or limit their use to certain times.

Despite the incorporation of pedagogical approaches promoting the development of biliteracy, it is expected that assessments will remain rigid and standardized with a focus on measuring the development of students' English proficiency. A more balanced approach to assessment that measures language proficiency across multiple languages will continue to be needed.

Many questions remain related to ELs and U.S. schooling across the next decade. These include: (1) How will teacher and administrative-preparation programs prepare educators to best serve increasing numbers of English-learners? (2) How will schools engage families to support the development of biliterate students? (3) How will the education profession recruit qualified educators to support the needs of ELs? (4) How will state and national education policies impact bilingual education? And (5) Will English-only students be disadvantaged?

By 2030, tensions and conflict surrounding the best way to educate English-learners will continue. However, we can hope that a focus on equitable school practices that promote biliteracy and honor all cultures and languages will become the norm rather than the exception in U.S. schools.

'Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies'

Aisha Christa Atkinson, M.S., is a high school educator with nearly 10 years of teaching, curriculum design, and instructional-leadership experience in secondary English/language arts and English as a second language.

Pre-pandemic, educators and advocates were “banging the gong” for fairer, more inclusive campus and district practices for multilingual students. The combination of deficit-thinking as well as limited funding for curriculum and instructional support created severe barriers and achievement gaps for multilingual students. While the evidence was in the data, statistically and anecdotally, no one was listening. Then the United States of America shut down, and suddenly, the playing field leveled just enough for that proverbial gong to be heard.

While these inequities heavily impacted countless numbers of students, none experienced them worse than the subpopulations of special education and multilingual-learners. And it didn't take long for families and educators to point out these frustrating circumstances in board meetings and social media discussions. Now, more than ever before, conversations are being had, policies are being reevaluated and changed, and attention is finally being given to the experiences of the multilingual-learner. With equity, inclusivity, and culturally sustaining pedagogies taking center stage in post-pandemic America, multilingual-learners (MLLs) are the demographic poised to reap the most benefit.

Based upon 2018 enrollment data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, the MLL demographic in the United States grew by 1 million students across two decades. Suppose the data continues to trend and federal policies improve in the reception and accommodation of international families. In that case, I predict that by 2031, we will see growth that exceeds 14 percent, bringing the total number of these students to between 6 and 7 million. Statistics like these will ultimately force the hands of many key players in the educational policy sector to implement new guidelines that address student needs and achievement gaps. These policies will undoubtedly obligate public schools to meet specific diversity, equity, and inclusion standards that prioritize the requirement of continuous learning.

Topics such as MLL instructional best practices for all classroom educators and appraisers, the establishment of family- and community-engagement programs, and initiatives to increase the participation rates of MLLs in gifted and talented programs should all be prioritized in this new era. Federal, state,

and local governments need to address educator preparation programming deficits and historic underrepresentation for multilingual families in campus-improvement processes, as well as discriminatory practices around the sheltering of gifted and talented MLLs based only on their English-language proficiency.

By doing these things, in 2032, instructional methodology will be informed by culturally sustaining pedagogies that serve to honor and respect the kaleidoscopic backgrounds of all students. These rich stories of language and tradition will be key to bridging gaps in achievement and student need. For students, this shift will be transformative because they will finally be seen for who they truly are: youth “at promise” for greatness, as opposed to “at risk” for failure.

Ultimately, though, when I think about the future of multilingual education, I think about students like Ever Lopez, a brilliant and resilient learner who was born to Mexican-immigrant parents and who was denied his high school diploma for wearing a Mexican flag over his graduation robe. Lopez was denied this rite of passage and booed for choosing to exhibit pride for his heritage in defiance of a culture of homogeneity. How many years did Lopez endure without ever seeing himself in American schools? How many times did he have to overcome a linguistic or cultural barrier steeped in ideology that privileged a cultural sameness over an individual identity? What could have been done to ensure that every student had an opportunity to represent their identities on what is supposed to be a universal milestone in the United States of America?

In 2031, I believe that those questions will be answered and that all of the Ever Lopezes within our schools will be seen, heard, and applauded for what they contribute to our country.

No More 'Silos'

Sarah Said currently leads a multilingual-learning program in an EL education school in a suburb 30 miles west of Chicago:

We're asking about predictions of what support and assessment will look like in 10 years for multilingual-learners. I know what I would like them to look like. However, will our policymakers and the powers that be agree with me? We know that multilingual-learners come from all economic and cultural backgrounds in this country. We also know that our practices from the past will not work in 10 years. We're already starting to see that now. What needs to change?

Biases Toward Multilingual-Learners

How can we change biases toward multilingual-learners? Our language. In 10 years,

my hope is that we stop referring to students as limited-English-proficient, English-language learners, the “high” kid, and the “low” kid. I prefer to use the term “multilingual” because it is asset-based. When we change our language, it helps us change the mindsets in how we view students. Really understanding the value that our multilingual-learners give to our classrooms and schools will open up so many doors for them.

Isolating Multilingual-Learners and Staff Who Support Them

I’ve had the classroom that was supposed to be a closet for the students I supported. I’m sure many of you reading this have. My students felt isolated from my school, and so did I. I got to a point a few years ago where I ate lunch with my students and didn’t eat lunch in the teachers’ lounge. Staff struggled with understanding the students I served and understanding me as well. We need to get rid of the silos that isolate us and work together to support “our” students. We need to have multilingual-learners among their peers. I foresee more co-taught classrooms that embrace inclusiveness in 10 years. We will also embrace student voice more as we saw in the pandemic—those tech tools we learned really enabled student voice more. And I foresee staff who support multilingual-learners seen as instructional leaders among their peers. Not only do we have training in content instruction, but we have training in language instruction, too!

Stronger Multilingual Family Communication and Engagement

The pandemic proved that we weren’t doing a good enough job communicating with multilingual families. Many students who are multilingual-learners fell off the grid for the sake of difficulty communicating with their families. We need to see multilingual family engagement as priority. More online communication with families will continue to happen as well as parent academies, language-learner family nights, and even allowing families to observe classrooms and be involved in the learning that their children are engaged in. We need to open up our schools more to families.

We hope that we have learned some lessons for supporting our multilingual-learners. We have to be catalysts to work toward and encourage these changes or we will go back to “normal,” which really was status quo. ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.



— Carlos Castillo/Stock/Getty

OPINION

Published April 7, 2022

What I Learned From Teaching English-Language Learners for 30 Years

By Kim Hanley

When I started teaching in California’s public schools 30 years ago, it was the beginning of the so-called English-only movement. “Qualified teachers” for multilingual learners were chosen to teach if they had a good working knowledge of English. They were expected to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Students learning English were not allowed to speak in their primary language in the classroom.

As a new teacher, when a student in my class was learning English and struggling to complete grade-level work in this new language, I’d often provide texts that had been adapted and written at a lower difficulty level so they could feel a sense of accomplishment. I was unaware that through my choices I was potentially creating a longer road to English literacy and academic success.

So much has changed for English-language learners in the last three decades. Our classrooms are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse. We now know more about how to support diverse learners, and teachers have more resources. We have seen

how high-quality curricula with scaffolds and formative assessments can contribute to helping all students build skills and reach their full potential. I’d love to share some lessons I’ve learned about the ways high-quality instructional materials in the hands of great teachers ensure all students can grow and thrive.

In the early days of my teaching career, we didn’t have the research to inform us about asset-based approaches to language that focus on the strengths English-language learners bring to the classroom. We know so much more now about how students learn, what supports students need to acquire new language skills, and the importance of providing grade-level content to all students. Research shows that students are more likely to receive consistent grade-level content and be able to meet associated standards if teachers are using high-quality instructional materials.

Some features of great materials include meaningful supports for multilingual learners, such as concept building through authentic language use and explicit instruction. These components offer teachers a launching pad from which to tailor a curriculum to a student’s specific needs.

Investing in high-quality curricula can also help save teachers hours and hours spent searching online for unvetted supplements.

That time can then be redirected toward focusing on the individual needs of students and motivating them through meaningful engagement about their interests and lives.

EdReports.org, a nonprofit for which I am now an instructional-materials reviewer, is one great starting place to find reviews of comprehensive K-12 math, science, and English/language arts programs with details on how well materials support multilingual learners. Although your local needs will vary, below are four key components of quality to consider when assessing instructional materials:

1. Multiple access points. High-quality curricula should encourage multiple ways to access concepts and include activities that engage students in conversations with their peers. Linguistic scaffolds for multilingual learners also often work well. Visual examples and tools can encourage students to show what they know even as they are developing core language skills.

2. Strong foundations. Multilingual learners come to school with varied background knowledge, and it may not always be what materials we assume students bring to the table. High-quality materials should provide space for teachers and students to build background knowledge on important topics to support their understanding of texts and ability to absorb and retain information. By providing opportunities to build background

knowledge, materials allow for all learners to be successful—not just those who have certain experiences. Guidance for teachers on how to access and validate varied background knowledge is also important.

Through the building of background knowledge, multilingual learners (and all learners really) can develop the necessary language to access more complex texts and tasks in a variety of content areas.

3. Meaningful engagement. Strong materials include opportunities for teachers to have meaningful interactions among students. For example, there are times when pairing students with other English-learners is appropriate, and other instances when having small groups with both native English speakers and multilingual learners can enrich student growth and understanding.

Curriculum-embedded formative assessments are key to ensuring students stay engaged while building language skills and accessing content. Assessments help teachers understand where students need support most and provide information that can lead to better decisions around how to support and engage individual students.

4. Multiple representations. It is not enough for materials to simply address academic standards and provide pathways to meeting those standards. The best curriculum will also engage student

interests, honor where students come from, and leverage all assets they bring into the classroom.

Questions to consider when assessing materials include: Can students see themselves in the materials? But more than that, how are students represented in the content they are engaging with? Do they have opportunities to see their own experiences and cultures elevated in a meaningful way?

I have learned a lot in my years in the classroom. Now, working with hundreds of teachers who have multilingual learners in their classrooms, I make sure to highlight all the benefits of having a multilingual classroom. I begin with asset-based language and provide resources and suggestions for curriculum-specific professional learning that I know will set the teacher up for success.

And for me, success is the excitement in the eyes of a student when they're able to show what they know on a grade-level assignment. Whether they do so in their home language or in English, the most important thing is to keep students engaged and motivated in the process of learning. ■

Kim Hanley has over three decades of teaching and coaching experience. She is currently a Title III instructional coach for Capistrano Unified, a public school district in California; an English/language arts reviewer for EdReports; and a consultant for the English Learners Success Forum.

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