Supporting Emergent Bilinguals

iStock/Getty

Page 7

Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

Page 3

EDITOR'S NOTE

The number of emergent bilingual students in schools is growing, highlighting the critical need for effective and inclusive instruction. This Spotlight explores strategies to best support these learners in their language acquisition and academic success. From expanding dual-language immersion programs to overhauling instructional models for English learners, these articles offer valuable perspectives. Discover key classroom traits and practices linked to English learners' success and more.

One of the last projects U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona oversaw was the publication of playbooks on how to establish and sustain dual-language immersion programs across the country.

Published February 12, 2025

How Schools Can Expand Dual-Language Immersion Programs

By Ileana Najarro

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona championed multilingualism for all students, as well as improved programming for the nation's English learners.

One of the last major projects he oversaw in his tenure at the U.S. Department of Education was the office of English language acquisition's dual-language immersion project: a publication of four playbooks with detailed guidance for educators on how to establish and sustain dual-language immersion programs.

What these programs look like can vary across the country but typically, a dual-language immersion program covers kindergarten through 5th grade and students learn academic content while also receiving language instruction in both English and a partner language—often Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, or French.

The playbooks offer educators a centralized collection of data and insights on how to best support this kind of instruction, said Conor Williams, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank, whose research is referenced in the guides.

The playbooks are organized by topics such as policy considerations for these programs, the foundational conditions needed to open these programs, staffing concerns, and the role family

and community engagement play. From there, the playbooks break down information by audience: state leaders, district leaders, school leaders, and family and community leaders.

"I think that it matters to have these different thematic elements of dual language broken out like that," Williams said. "I think that makes it easier to plug and play where your community might need to look or might not need to look."

Though it remains unclear whether the current Trump administration would promote and prioritize multilingual education, including dual-language immersion, Williams and others note that bipartisan state and local demand for such programming predates even the Biden administration.

Title III funds which cover supplemental programs for English are not dedicated to dual-language programs but are often used by states for this, Williams. The fate of these federal dollars remains unclear as the Trump administration reviews various federal budgets and grant programs. The U.S. Department of Education did not respond to EdWeek's request for comment prior to publication.

Case studies show how dual-language immersion can help improve academic performance

Researchers have for years found dual-language immersion programs to benefit all students by

promoting bilingualism in academic contexts.

These programs benefit English learners in terms of improving their linguistic skills in their home language and English as well as boosting their academic performance, Williams said.

There are long-term economic benefits as well.

"We know that employers in a range of sectors, from health care to technical services, are more likely to rely on employees with foreign language skills. The research also tells us that learning another language helps kids to be more creative, more nimble, and better able to make good decisions," Cardona said at an event launching the playbooks in December.

The playbooks provide case studies from California, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah, the states with the highest number of dual-language immersion programs in the country (about 200 each).

Conservative states like Texas and Utah have made major strides both in financial support for these programs and pedagogical commitments to this type of education, Williams said.

For instance, in the staffing playbook, school leaders are advised to "ensure support structures are in place for ongoing professional learning and growth" of teachers. It notes that Utah "provides a series of grade-span-specific collaboration protocols and [dual-language immersion] partner-teacher resources."

Staffing concerns, including recruiting and retaining enough qualified personnel to teach in dual-language immersion programs, create some of the biggest challenges in opening up these programs across the country, Williams' research has found.

That's why the playbooks recommend district leaders "establish specific bilingual teacher pathways for current bilingual staff," "establish 'grow-your-own' programs specifically tailored to preparing a supply of local educators," and "pursue creative recruitment efforts and incentives."

The playbooks provide some examples of how these approaches work, such as a Texas district offering scholarships to paraprofessionals to enroll in a local pathways program, a California district creating a program to help existing bilingual educators get a bilingual teaching credential, and the Boston public schools partnering with the mayor's office to obtain H1-B visas for credentialed immigrant teachers.

"The more bilingual teachers we train, the more dual language programs we can offer, and the more that we can offer, the more we can ensure that everybody gets access who wants it," Williams said. ■

Research-Based and Research-Proven

Lexia English is built upon research that supports best practices for language learning and development, and it's proven to work. Efficacy studies demonstrate that providing targeted oral language and grammar instruction through Lexia English benefits the acquisition of broader literacy skills. These studies[1,2] fall under the ESSA tiers of "Promising" and "Moderate" for providing evidence of program effectiveness.

Average Domain Score

+18 points
- 1488
- 1470

+14 points
- 1487
- 1473

Oral Domain
(n=2034)

Written Domain
(n=2034)

Lexia English User

Non-Lexia English User
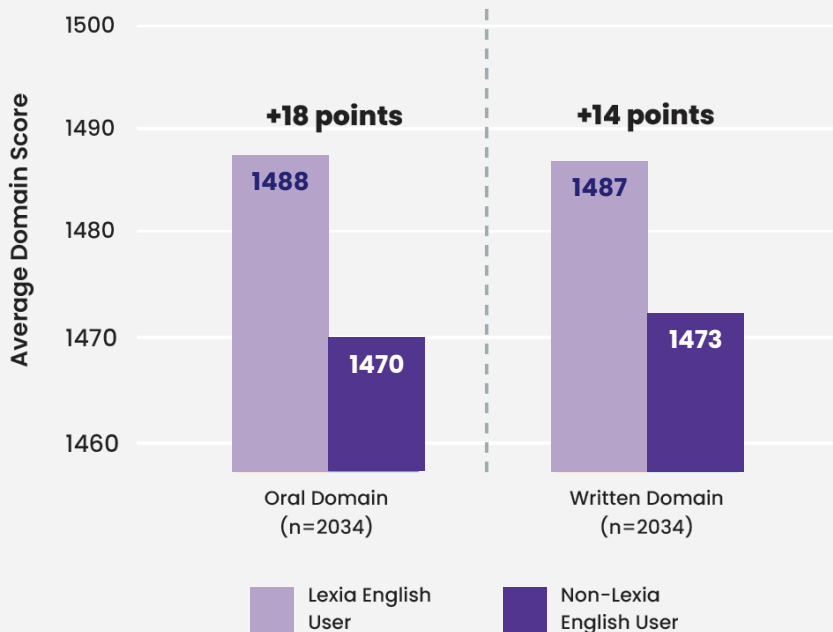
Source: Impact of Using Lexia English on the California English Language Proficiency Assessment[1]

Lexia English Users Perform Better Across All Language Domains

The efficacy studies conducted to examine Lexia English's effectiveness show there's a clear connection between using the program and achieving gains in both the oral and written domains, benefiting students in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.[1,2]

Meeting Learners' Needs Flexibly

Lexia English addresses a range of needs, meeting students where they are and enabling educators to deliver targeted instruction that works with their program and their environment.

Eliminating Accent Biases

The speech recognition technology is cross-trained to listen for and accept phoneme blends—namely, diverse accents. These speech capabilities were built to understand words as they are spoken by children who regularly use English in addition to one or more other languages. The program's Adaptive Blended Learning approach ensures a pluralistic teaching method, enabling students to learn the English language while being exposed to a wide range of accents through various interactions and formats.

Student-Driven Learning

Students learn and practice in the online program at school or at home using purposeful repetition, made possible through the program's speech recognition technology.

Small-Group Instruction and Collaborative Practice

Educators deliver targeted instruction with Lexia Lessons®. Lexia Skill Builders® are also used for individual practice, paired and small-group activities, practice activities for both written and oral delivery, teacher-guided instructional elements, and whole-class participation.

Classroom Center Rotations

Summer School

Sheltered Instruction

Push-In

At-Home / Remote Learning

Before and After School

Pull-Out

Designated and Integrated ELD

Dual Language

Alternative Implementations

A Teacher Makes the Case for Using AI With English Learners

By Ileana Najarro

Sarah Said, an English teacher working with English learners at an alternative high school near Chicago, has seen translation apps evolve over time.

Enough input from users and linguists have made Google Translate a much more useful tool than it might have been a few years back.

Lately, her English learners at Dream Academy in Elgin, Ill., have demonstrated a knack for using and finding a variety of generative artificial intelligence tools and translation apps, prompting Said to learn more about this technology and guide her students in responsible and ethical uses.

With more than 20 years of experience working with English learners, Said encourages other teachers to familiarize themselves with new AI tools. She presented on this topic virtually at the annual WIDA conference in mid-October and spoke with Education Week about how teachers working with English learners should approach AI tools in class.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why should teachers working with English learners not shy away from AI tools?

They're already using it.

I've noticed you will get things that don't look like your students' writing, and they have tried to use AI, but they haven't done it responsibly. It's really then taking what they've done and working with them on saying, "Hey, this is a starting point. Let's work on expanding the idea that AI gave you so that now it becomes your own idea to where your own feelings and your own emotion is in there."

I do have students who regularly will use translation apps in class and outside of class. I'm noticing, where is this coming from? Students will tell you, "I used ChatGPT to help translate." I'm like, "Well, OK, but now we have to grow what you did."

That's where it becomes a one-on-one conversation. How can we change the sentence to bring your voice into the sentence rather than AI's voice into the sentence? Almost like us-
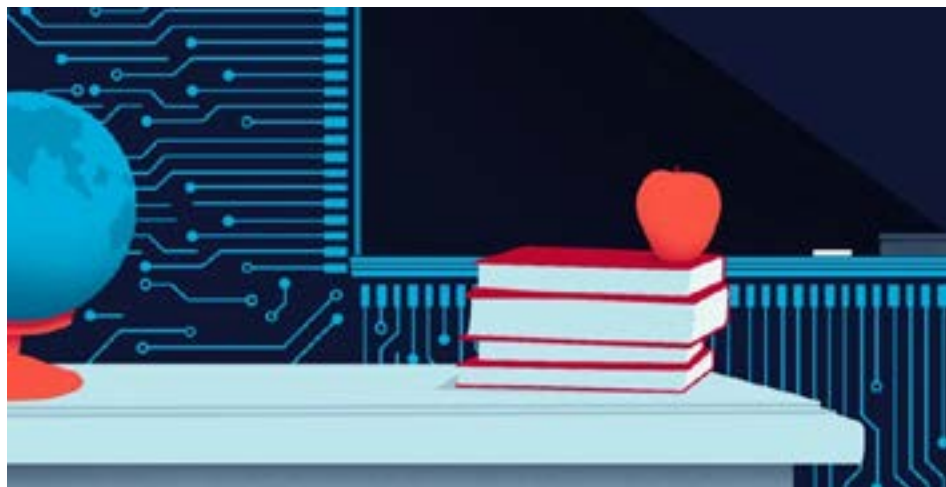
Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

> **Students will tell you, 'I used ChatGPT to help translate.' I'm like, 'Well, OK, but now we have to grow what you did.'**
>
> **SARAH SAID**
> English teacher
> Chicago, Ill.

ing a calculator in math class, right? You may struggle with certain operations, but you still have to do the algebra, you still have to do the proofs in geometry. AI is your starting point to build on better ideas in learning and understanding language.

I didn't totally know what was out there. [Students] were showing me things. You do have to teach them that there's a line that they have to walk with AI, and it's definitely not going away. My students, when they're looking for jobs and they're writing things—applications and resumes—they have to make sure that they are using certain words. Unfortunately, there are employers out there that are using AI to help them sift through resumes because they have thousands of resumes to sift through.

English learners might be the first ones to actually be in the know because they've had to adapt to using so many tools in the classroom.

In my building, I feel that way, because they had to learn language for survival. Years ago in another district, I was actually a coordinator, and I worked with moms from Yemen, and it was very interesting. This is when Google Voice first came out. And these moms would just use Google Voice with their phones. I'm like, "Wow, that's so innovative."

I think that sometimes our language learners are the most innovative because they've had to work to navigate certain situations, that they might be on the cusp of more than some of the gen. ed. students.

What should teachers keep in mind when exploring AI tools?

A teacher has to understand what the tools are and what the language of AI is, because it's another world. So before even beginning to embark on AI in a classroom, the teacher has to understand it. I know that this is a work in progress with states and districts right now, but districts have to have parameters on how schools and districts can use it.

First, the teacher has to become knowledgeable about what tools are out there. Then, as they're becoming knowledgeable about the tools, that's where they become knowledgeable about the parameters, they become knowledgeable about policy. We have to regulate it in a sense, too. You don't want kids putting their data out there, so you have to regulate that and understand that. If a student is using a tool, you have to show them how to use it responsibly.

I think AI enhances language learning. It's up to the teacher on how they model the usage of it. The kids need to see an appropriate model in order to develop those skills.

What have been some of the strategic ways AI has helped your instruction?

I've used it as a model. I'll break down a sentence for students, and I'll show them how the AI helps to find meaning within the sentence. I will use AI in front of them to show them, "Hey, when you ask this question, this is what's going to come up, and this is what they're going to tell you. It's not just the question you ask. It's how you ask the question."

Then it teaches this idea of, how do we command language? Because a computer takes everything literally. It's kind of like Amelia Bedelia, right? And what is the difference, then, between that literal and figurative language?

When you send an email to a person, the person cannot tell what you are like on the other end. If you send an email and you sound mad but you didn't mean to sound mad, the person on the other end doesn't see that. So how do we command language when we are not in front of people?

Even designing on Canva [an online graphic design tool], you could use their AI tools to design something. ∎

iStock/Getty

Published October 16, 2024

2 Districts Overhauled How They Teach English Learners. Here's How

By Ileana Najarro

Years ago, the Beaverton school district in Oregon participated in a study to determine the right models for improving English learners' academic achievement.

The results, which came out in 2019, pointed to two promising models, especially for the elementary grades: dual-language immersion, in which students learn in both English and another language, and an integrated, collaborative model, such as when a content-area and English-language-development teacher work side by side in the same classroom, ensuring English learners are exposed to grade-level academic content and vocabulary.

While beneficial to both English learners and native English-speaking students, dual-language immersion programs are costly and hard to find across the country.

So Beaverton, the Corvallis school district, and other Oregon districts have worked in recent years to scale up their use of integrated, collaborative teaching.

They've encountered some logistical hurdles adjusting to a new model—changing schedules, staffing classrooms with qualified English-language-development teachers alongside content-area teachers, and getting all staff on board with the shared responsi-

bility of helping English learners learn English. But they've been able to address some of the factors that were holding English learners back.

In Beaverton, students who retained the English-learner classification into high school were missing some electives and core courses because of the time they had to spend in English-language-development sessions. And in Corvallis a decade ago, half of Latino students—including many who were English learners—weren't graduating on time.

The switch to the collaborative model has allowed the districts to tackle those problems.

"We know that language learning cannot just take place one period of the day in an English-language-development period," said Andrew Robinson, an assistant administrator for multilingual programs for the Beaverton district, which is located outside of Portland. "It must be supported throughout students' entire day, so that is where we're focusing a lot of effort now: clarifying roles, helping people understand and build capacity so that not just the ELD teacher, but all teachers, can support language development."

As the population of English learners continues to grow nationwide, Oregon districts such as Beaverton and Corvallis offer a case study in how to use the collaborative model to help English learners learn English through academic content.

Integrated, collaborative models take different forms

Generally, the integrated, collaborative model takes two different forms: co-teaching and consulting.

In the co-teaching model, English learners take a high school course, such as social studies, alongside their non-English learner peers. The English learners in the class are at about the same level of English-language proficiency, but there's nothing that really sets them apart in the classroom. They're not taken out of the room for special instruction or given a different curriculum.

In the classroom are two teachers, the social studies teacher and an English-language-development teacher, answering questions, planning lessons, and teaching together as equals.

With consulting, the content-area teacher teaches alone, but shares planning time with English-language teachers to ensure lesson plans feature English-language instruction strategies, Robinson said.

Beaverton and Corvallis use a combination of these models.

In Corvallis, both English-language and content-area teachers have told Marcianne Koetje, the district's multilingual programs and equity coordinator, that the collaborative model has not only helped English learners but all students in the classroom.

But there are several logistical and cultural challenges to these models.

In Corvallis, the switch to the collaborative model required administrators to think about English learners' schedules first when preparing master schedules each year, Koetje said.

And Beaverton—a much larger district about 100 miles north of Corvallis—is working now to extend the collaborative model to the high school level.

But one of the biggest hurdles for both has been getting all teachers onboard with the idea of playing a part in language instruction through academic content.

"Especially at the high school level, there's this fixed mindset that I'm a content teacher and I'm endorsed in science or I'm endorsed in social studies, and language has always been somebody else's [job]," Koetje said.

Overcoming challenges to these models requires district support

Koetje has had to be strategic in choosing whom to hire as English-language-development

teachers. The district now looks for teachers with general classroom or coaching experience that can translate to co-teaching or consulting.

"I think that has really helped us as a district, because in the past we had language-development specialists who had only ever been trained on how to do small groups, and we noticed there was a huge disconnect, because when they were co-teaching, when they were doing integrated ELD, they didn't really have the skill set necessarily to work with all students," Koetje said.

With content-area teachers, Koetje and her team have found often that it's not that they don't want to engage with language instruction altogether, but rather they are afraid to admit they don't know how to do it. Professional development and schedules that allow for shared planning time with English-language-development teachers have helped, she said.

In Beaverton, district leaders must sort out how to set up planning and classroom schedules, as well as how to pair content-area teachers with English-language-development peers, Robinson said.

Beyond these logistical challenges, the larger challenge Beaverton—with more than 50 schools and nearly 39,000 students—faces is how to coach so many teachers with different degrees of experience with either language or content-area instruction on this new model.

The district has turned to professional development to try to address this.

In one session, a high school English-language-development teacher led a mock health lesson for various content-area teachers completely in Spanish. She used language-learning strategies that help students learn content even if they're not proficient in the language of instruction. These are the same strategies teachers would be expected to use to help English learners in their own classrooms where they're teaching in English.

The exercise put teachers in the proverbial shoes of English learners so they could better understand how language instruction through content works, said Katherine Hart, a teacher on special assignment at the district as part of the high school multilingual team.

"One of the main goals of our PD is to really get the content-area teacher to see the ELD teacher as a partner, and you can't just hand over your lessons and expect them to be adopted and then get them back. It is really a team effort, and you're really planning together," Hart said.

English-language-development teachers are getting professional development on stepping into coaching and co-teaching roles that they may not be used to after years of working primarily with small groups of English learners in separate classrooms.

The Beaverton and Corvallis districts, along with several other districts and researchers from Oregon State University they're working with, have also developed a district-level guide for using integrated, collaborative models to help other districts in the state—particularly those that are smaller and more rural. ■

Published September 18, 2024

What Schools Can Do So They Don't Exclude English Learners From Core Courses

By Ileana Najarro

Exclusionary tracking can keep English learners from taking the courses they need to graduate on time

Schools are legally required to ensure English learners have access to English-language instruction. They also have an obligation to ensure such students can access core academic content in mathematics, English language/arts, social studies, and science.

Yet not all English learners are enrolled in those core courses in their high school years, according to a new research brief. That puts them at risk of falling behind their classmates and not learning the academic skills they need to complete high school.

Ilana Umansky and Karen Thompson, associate professors at the University of Oregon and Oregon State University respectively, found evidence that English learners in both Oregon and Michigan were excluded from core content during their high school years. And they worry it's a common practice elsewhere in the United States as well, they said.

In Oregon, for instance, there was about a 10-percentage-point difference between the proportion of English learners enrolled in ELA courses and the proportion of their non-English learner peers—a phenomenon that researchers refer to as exclusionary tracking.

The researchers analyzed course enrollment data from Oregon for 2013-2019 and data from Michigan for 2011-2015.

The new research highlights the need for school officials to pay attention to course enrollment data so they're ensuring all English learners have access to the core academic content they need to graduate and aren't falling behind their non-English learner peers as a result.

Why English learners are excluded from courses

The new research brief, published in late August by the National Research and Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners, part of the research firm WestEd, didn't pinpoint causes for exclu-

iStock/Getty

> "We can't say [whether] that's happening or not. All we can say is that certain characteristics are associated with higher levels of exclusion."
>
> **ILANA UMANSKY**
> Associate professor
> University of Oregon

sionary tracking, but the researchers did find a common trend in the data from schools in both states.

For instance, dually identified students—those classified as both English learners and eligible for special education services—are far more likely to be excluded from core content.

The same goes for newcomers and students with lower levels of English-language proficiency, Umansky said.

Educators could be wrongly assuming that such students can't simultaneously learn English alongside core academic content, she added.

"We can't say that that's happening or not. All we can say is that certain characteristics are associated with higher levels of exclusion," Umansky said.

A prevailing hypothesis in past research has been that schools aren't enrolling English learners in core courses because they are instead prioritizing English-language development courses in these students' daily schedules.

But to Umansky and Thompson's surprise, scheduling only explained why English learners with low English-language proficiency were missing out on core courses, not their English learner peers who were more familiar with English.

More research is needed to figure out exactly what's keeping these English learners out of core courses.

Past research has explored potential reasons, Thompson said.

For instance, a lack of training on serving multilingual students for school counselors and other designated staff members tasked with deciding on course placements could be a factor, past research has suggested.

What educators can do to end exclusionary tracking

The new research brief highlights the need for local and state education leaders to dig more deeply into student course schedules and enrollment data to prevent exclusionary tracking, Umansky said.

Once education leaders have more data on these gaps, Thompson said, they can then discuss how to ensure not only that English learners have access to core courses, but that they can succeed in them.

For instance, it's helpful to ensure all English learners are enrolled in core courses, but if the teachers in those classrooms aren't trained in best practices for supporting multilingual students, they might not be providing the best learning environment for those students.

"We care about the opportunity to learn, but we also care that that opportunity is meaningful, that it's not enough for students to just be placed in the classes if there's not a structure for success," Thompson said.

District leaders can then make investments to ensure educators have the tools they need to help English learners succeed in core courses, Thompson said.

In Oregon, for instance, some districts used COVID-19 relief funds to help teachers obtain license endorsements to work with multilingual students.

It can also be beneficial for school administrators to simply review English learners' schedules, looking specifically at the classes in which they're enrolled—and the classes that aren't on their schedules—and asking why, Umansky said. This practice can help ensure English learners aren't missing out on courses they need to graduate on time, Umansky said.

Messaging from state and local education leaders that it's a priority to reduce exclusionary tracking can be powerful, said Fernanda Kray, a senior technical assistance consultant at the nonprofit American Institutes for Research, who did not participate in Umansky and Thompson's research.

"What is the expectation that we are setting in ensuring full participation for students?" Kray said. "The message has to be clear that English-learner status or the English-language-proficiency level cannot be used to deny access to core content, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate—whatever course it is that they are entitled to or they desire."

Teachers also need to collaborate, understanding that language instruction is a shared responsibility, and not strictly the domain of English-as-a-second-language teachers. Students can learn language through course content, and they can also pick up course content while learning language, Kray said.

This type of collaboration requires support and encouragement from school and district administrators, including space in master schedules that allows it to happen. ∎

More Like This

Short and Sweet Tips for Supporting English Learners

Schools Are Graduating More Students With a Seal That Shows They're Multilingual

English Learners May Feel Under Attack. Teachers Can Help Ease Their Fear

iStock/Getty

Published September 6, 2024

The Classroom Traits and Practices Linked to English Learners' Success

By Ileana Najarro

Positive attitudes toward school and access to dual-language immersion programs are associated with better academic performance among English learners. Learning in overcrowded classrooms and having a disability, meanwhile, are characteristics associated with lower reading scores among this growing subset of the student population.

These are some of the findings from a new U.S. Government Accountability Office report that examined the student, teacher, and school characteristics associated with English learners' academic achievement, progress toward English-language proficiency, and growth in reading scores over time.

While the report, published in late August, is geared toward federal leadership, as the GAO is an office of Congress, Jacqueline Nowicki, a director on the GAO's education, workforce, and income security team, said local educators can benefit from understanding the various factors at play in English learners' education.

"It's an opportunity for states, districts, and individual schools to find themselves in the data and see where they fit, and then think about, what can we do at the local level that can help move the needle in the right direction?" Nowicki said.

Data align with past research findings

Researchers used state and federal datasets—including state reading and English proficiency assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study that examines groups of children over a multi-year period—for the new report. They examined potential relationships between students' academic performance and characteristics including students' race, teachers' absences, and more.

Some findings across grade levels include:

- higher reading scores among female English learners,

- higher reading scores among Asian English learners, and

- lower reading and math scores, and less progress toward English proficiency, when students were faced with high levels of teacher absences.

Nowicki also noted that some associations were only apparent in specific contexts.

For instance, researchers tracked national reading performance for both 4th and 8th grades. But only in 4th grade was there a clear association between English learners' stronger performance in reading and having a teacher of the same race or ethnicity. In math, having a teacher of the same race or ethnicity was only associated with better performance in 8th grade.

These findings—highlighting associations, not causation—offer schools a chance to take a close look at their setups to determine what systemic changes are needed to improve English learners' academic performance, Nowicki said.

Some findings from the GAO report echo what's been found in prior research.

The new report found that English learners dually identified as also having a disability had worse performance on national reading assessments.

"It's challenging for schools to be able to really meet their needs," said Rachel Garrett, a managing researcher at the nonprofit American Institutes for Research. "We see it in the research, we see it in the data, and we also hear it from those who are directly working to serve these students."

Garrett's past research also backs up the GAO finding on the potential benefits of dual-language immersion programs for English learners' academic success. In dual-language immersion, students—often a mix of English learners and native English speakers—learn in both English and another language.

"This can be a pathway to helping their students, and not see their first language as a hindrance, but something that may actually benefit their outcomes in both English and their home language," Garrett said.

However, access to such programs nationwide remains uneven, as past research has highlighted.

For Nowicki and Garrett, the new data analysis of characteristics can be a starting point for educators hoping to improve English learners' educational outcomes, and a reminder that this work doesn't need to happen in silos.

"No district or school is alone in thinking about this, and probably there's an opportunity to take a more cohesive approach to figuring out how to tackle some of these issues," Garrett said. ∎

Lexia ENGLISH™
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Empowering Emergent Bilinguals to Thrive
ACADEMIC YEAR 2023-2024

162,100 STUDENTS

77,600 EDUCATORS

7,400 SCHOOLS

THE RESEARCH SPEAKS FOR ITSELF[1]

Emergent Bilinguals who use Lexia English Language Development™ out-perform non-users on assessments of language proficiency. Across several studies, effect sizes for Lexia English ranged from **0.18** to **0.40**.

STUDENT-DRIVEN LEARNING[2]

Students who used as recommended:

- Built speaking, listening, and grammar skills by completing an average of **163 units**
- Demonstrated what they learned across an average of **25 Presentations of Knowledge**
- Made progress such that **1 in 3 students moved up** a proficiency band in their respective language standard in the program

ACADEMIC CONVERSATIONS

344.2K Total hours of conversation

4.3M Total number of conversations

60% Percentage of time using Lexia English that was spent in conversations

> "Students have many opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in English as well as use real-life situations to apply the grammar skills that they are learning. Students receive scaffolded support when needed. The visuals and stories/information are culturally relevant."

> "I love the diversity. Students often comment when a character is similar to them."

VOICES OF LEXIA EDUCATORS

ALIGNS TO MULTIPLE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY STANDARDS

WIDA
CA ELD
TX ELPS
NY ELD
ELPA 21

1. For more information, visit lexialearning.com/research

2. Results for 31,685 K-6 U.S. students who used Lexia English between July 31, 2023, and May 26, 2024. Students were considered to have used the online portion of Lexia English as recommended if they used the program for at least 10 weeks and had an average of 30+ minutes/week of usage for grade K-2 students and 45+ minutes/week of usage for grade 3-6 students. Data compiled and analyzed by the Lexia Research Team.

Note: Includes usage data of sites available for reporting.

Lexia®

All for Literacy

lexialearning.com

OPINION

Published April 8, 2025

Students Make Mistakes. How Teachers Correct Them Matters

By Larry Ferlazzo

Errors and mistakes are common in the classroom and in education. And I've published many posts about them.

Today, educators share their strategies for handling errors made by students in their English-language-learner classes.

The Difference Between Mistakes and Errors

Michelle Makus Shory, Ed.D., is a career language educator who has taught grades K-12. She works at Seneca High School in Kentucky serving multilingual learners, their teachers, and their families. Shory is also an adjunct professor for local universities and co-creator of the website ELL 2.0:

In the English-language-learner classroom, when considering how to respond to an error, I think it's essential first to decide if it is an error or a mistake.

A mistake might be a missing period, the wrong verb tense, or a misspelled word. Many times, multilingual learners make mistakes when they are writing quickly or speaking. Often, the learner has the relevant knowledge, but they were distracted or working quickly.

Errors, on other hand, come from a lack of knowledge and occur multiple times. For example, using the wrong word, mispronouncing a word, or using incorrect punctuation. I do not worry too much about mistakes (we all make them), but I do address errors.

Stephen Krashen's theory of second-language acquisition reminds educators of the importance of the affective filter in acquiring a second language. If students feel comfortable and have minimal stress, there is a low affective filter, and language acquisition (learning) improves.

Conversely, if the affective filter is high, students feel stressed, which impairs their ability to comprehend and produce language. Knowing that error correction can lead to embarrassment and a higher affective filter, I am mindful of when and how I correct students' errors.

Errors in Speaking

For errors in oral language, I often respond to the student, acknowledging that I fully understood the message but with a subtle recasting of what the student said, including the correct pronunciation or word. For example, if a student asks me where they can set in the classroom. Instead of saying, "Here," I say, "You can sit over here." This gentle recasting is often noted by the student, but does not lead to embarrassment.

I also consider the environment. If the student is alone, I might demonstrate the word's correct form or pronunciation. However, if the student is speaking in front of peers in class, I use gentle recasting only.

I think it is essential to acknowledge errors in language because if we don't, this can lead to fossilization. Fossilization occurs when incorrect language forms become fixed or permanent in a learner's speech or writing. It is an error that has become a habit and is resistant to correction.

Errors in Writing

Errors in writing are a little different. Because the feedback is private, I'm more explicit with my corrections. However, I always acknowledge that I understood the message first. Then, I give the students some tips to improve that message.

I do not correct every error in a multilingual learner's writing. Instead, I look for a theme in mistakes like punctuation and capitalization or subject-verb agreement. Then, I correct those mistakes and provide advice on how to correct those errors. I have found that verbal (or audio) feedback is more impactful than written feedback, so I use tools like Mote or Vocaroo to record short audio clips explaining the error.

Finally, sharing examples of sentences with common errors has been an effective practice in my classroom. We analyze sentences and look for glows (things done well) and grows (things we would improve). My students enjoy looking at these together and suggesting ideas for improvement.

Error correction is necessary because we want to help students grow; however, overcorrecting or embarrassing students can do more harm than good. It is essential first to consider the situation before correcting an error. Above all, acknowledging that a message has been understood is most important.

Accuracy or Fluency?

Gina Elia, Ph.D., teaches Mandarin Chinese at an independent high school near Fort Lauderdale, Florida:

I have experience as a teacher of both English language learners and Mandarin language learners and as a writing tutor for English-proficient and ELL students.

In the field of ELL, there are two modes of correcting a student's errors in speech that teachers switch back and forth between depending on their goals. When the point of the lesson is to teach for accuracy, the teacher corrects students' oral mistakes as they make them.

When the goal of the lesson is for the student to make strides in fluency, however, the teacher hangs back from correcting, as this could reduce student confidence and stymie the development of fluid speaking. This ELL-specific approach to error correction offers a useful model for correction across disciplines.

Personally, in addition to ELL speaking, I use it when correcting ELL writing as well as English-proficient writing and Mandarin-language speaking and writing.

For example, if I want my ELL students to drill a particular grammar point in writing, I will explicitly correct every mistake they make related to that grammar point. Similarly, if I want my English-proficient students to improve the grammar and mechanics of their writing, I will pick an issue to focus on, such as spelling or comma or apostrophe use, and explicitly correct that issue in their work.

If, however, my goal in teaching either ELL or English-proficient students writing is to improve argumentation or organization, my comments will focus on these aspects of their writing rather than on grammatical or mechanical issues.

In these situations, if I do see patterns of error that are not related to the learning target, but which I feel the majority of the class could benefit from reviewing, I will go over them in class as a group rather than correcting every mistake that every student makes. I teach

Mandarin-language acquisition classes as well and can affirm that this style of correction works with other kinds of language learners besides ELLs, too.

The idea of targeting the focus of correction for a particular assignment, lesson, or unit on its specific learning goals can be applied to other fields beyond language acquisition as well. For instance, teachers can focus feedback on how well students measure out their necessary materials in a science lab experiment or how critically they engage with secondary sources in a social science assignment.

If teachers correct in this targeted manner inspired by ELL pedagogy, then literally everything in their lesson and assessment design, even down to their correction style, builds toward the overall goal of their lesson or unit, while having the bonus effect of cutting down on their grading time. This feedback style creates coherency, which allows students to have a better sense of both what they are learning and why they are learning it.

Neuroplasticity

Françoise Thenoux is an accomplished educator and advocate with a career spanning nearly two decades. For more information about her work and resources, you can follow her on social media:

As a language teacher, I recognize that the traditional prescriptivist approach of pointing out mistakes can be not only a colonial practice but also a damaging one for students. This approach often prioritizes conformity over learning, which can stifle students' willingness to take risks and engage deeply with the material. Instead, I focus on creating an environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes, understanding that errors are a natural and beneficial part of the learning process.

Emphasizing Neuroplasticity

One of the key strategies I use is teaching my students about neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. I explain how making mistakes and tackling challenges helps their brains grow stronger. This knowledge empowers students to view mistakes not as failures but as opportunities for growth and development.

Setting Students Up for Success

Creating an equitable learning environment is crucial for all students, including emergent bilinguals/multilinguals, neurodivergent students, and those dealing with

anxiety. I establish rituals and routines that serve every student, such as:

- **Mindfulness Practices:** These help reduce stress and create a calm, focused learning environment.

- **Brain Breaks:** Short breaks during lessons to keep students engaged and prevent cognitive overload.

- **Scaffolding:** Providing structured support to help students gradually build their understanding and skills.

- **Constructivist Approaches:** Encouraging students to construct their own understanding through hands-on, collaborative learning activities.

Cultivating a Growth Mindset

Fostering a growth mindset is essential for helping students see mistakes as stepping stones rather than unmovable obstacles. I encourage metacognition—thinking about one's own thinking—so students become aware of their learning processes and can reflect on their mistakes constructively. By emphasizing social-emotional learning and promoting a conscious, equity-informed growth mindset, I help students develop resilience and a positive attitude toward learning.

Humanizing the Learning Process

It's important to humanize our students and focus on their overall growth rather than being fixated on errors. This approach counters the characteristics of white supremacy culture that emphasize perfectionism and the fear of making mistakes. Instead, I work with my students to set both their goals and my goals on growth and development. We use road maps to learning paths that provide clear, achievable steps, helping students see their progress over time.

Using Mistakes as Learning Opportunities

Rather than simply pointing out mistakes, I use them as opportunities for learning and growth. For example:

- **Oral Work:** When a student makes an error in speaking, I might recast their statement correctly within a natural conversation, allowing them to hear the correct form without feeling embarrassed. Alternatively, I might ask

guiding questions that lead the student to self-correct.

- **Written Work:** For written errors, I provide feedback that encourages students to think critically about their work. Instead of marking everything as wrong, I highlight areas for improvement and ask questions that prompt students to revise and refine their work.

Equitable Feedback Practices

Feedback should be constructive and supportive, aimed at helping students improve while maintaining their confidence and motivation. I strive to provide feedback that is specific, actionable, and focused on growth. For example:

- **Highlighting Strengths:** Pointing out what students did well, alongside areas for improvement, helps build their confidence.

- **Actionable Suggestions:** Providing clear, specific suggestions for how students can improve gives them a concrete path forward.

- **Encouraging Reflection:** Asking students to reflect on their mistakes and think about how they can apply what they've learned in future tasks.

Supporting Mental Health

Incorporating practices that support mental health is vital for creating a positive learning environment. This includes promoting habits that help students manage stress and anxiety, such as regular mindfulness exercises and brain breaks. These practices not only improve students' well-being but also enhance their ability to focus and learn effectively.

Thanks to Michelle, Gina, and Francoise for contributing their thoughts! ∎

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

OPINION

Published November 19, 2024

Teacher Tips for Supporting English Learners

By Larry Ferlazzo

I love teaching English-language learners and I suspect most other educators feel the same way.

Nevertheless, teaching anyone comes with all sorts of challenges, and ELLs are no different.

Today's post begins a series exploring what those unique challenges might be and how we can best rise to them.

'Differentiated Instruction'

Marie Moreno, Ed.D., is an educator and administrator with over 30 years of experience specializing in newcomer and second-language acquisition. She is passionate about refugee and immigrant education by focusing on social and emotional needs and newcomer programming:

Teaching English-language learners presents several challenges that educators must navigate to ensure effective instruction. These challenges often stem from linguistic, cultural, and academic differences that ELLs bring to the classroom, making it crucial for teachers to adopt strategies that address these diverse needs.

1. Linguistic Barriers

The most significant challenge, I feel, is the language barrier itself. ELLs come into the classroom with varying levels of English proficiency, ranging from beginner to advanced. This variability can make it difficult for teachers to ensure all students comprehend the lesson content. Additionally, academic language—vocabulary and grammar specific to subjects like science or math—can be incredibly challenging for ELLs who may be more familiar with conversational English.

2. Cultural Differences

We must also look at cultural differences that can pose classroom challenges. ELLs may come from educational systems vastly different from those in the United States, leading to differences in classroom behavior, expectations, and participation.

In a recent trip to Uganda, I saw that if students do not perform at expected student-achievement levels, they are "caned" in front of their peers or "kicked out of school." Although corporal punishment is not common in American schools, students still see a difference in how we educate them. These cultural differences can affect how students interact with their teachers and respond to classroom instruction.

3. Social-Emotional Challenges

Many ELLs face social-emotional challenges, mainly if they are recent immigrants who have experienced trauma or disruption in their lives. The stress of learning a new language, in a new environment, and learning a new culture can affect their academic success.

4. Academic Gaps

ELLs often have academic gaps due to interruptions in their education, either from moving between countries or having limited access to schooling in their home country. These gaps can make it challenging for them to keep up with grade-level content.

A few recommendations to address these challenges are:

- Implement sheltered instruction strategies, such as visual aids, modeling academic language, and scaffolding lessons to break down complex concepts into manageable parts. Interactive strategies like Total Physical Response, in which students physically act out vocabulary words, can also be beneficial.

- Create a culturally responsive classroom environment. This includes incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, respecting diverse perspectives, and establishing classroom norms encouraging all students to participate actively. Building relationships with students and their families can help teachers better understand their cultural backgrounds and tailor instruction accordingly.

- Create a trauma-sensitive classroom environment where ELLs feel safe and valued. Fostering a sense of community within the classroom can offer support by providing regular check-ins with students to address their emotional needs and providing access to counseling services if necessary. Incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum can help them develop coping skills and build resilience.

- Differentiated instruction, my favorite, is vital to addressing academic gaps. Teachers can assess students' current knowledge and provide targeted support through small-group instruction (learning stations). Regular formative assessments help track progress and adjust instruction to meet students' evolving needs. Teachers must ensure they provide the I+1 model, making the content not too hard but not too easy!

Teaching ELLs requires a multifaceted approach considering their linguistic, cultural, social-emotional, and academic challenges. By employing strategies like sheltered instruction, culturally responsive teaching, SEL, and differentiated instruction, educators can create an inclusive classroom environment that supports the success of all students. The goal is to ensure that ELLs learn English and thrive academically and socially, contributing their unique perspectives to the classroom community.

Teachers Need 'a Big Heart and Tailored Strategies'

Anastasia M. Martinez is an English-language development coach in Pittsburg, Calif.:

Teaching multilingual learners is a highly rewarding and challenging task. Having worked with multilingual learners in the United States and abroad, I realize that I would not be the teacher I am today without working with multilingual learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Working with them requires a big heart and tailored strategies that will help this group of students thrive academically and socially. Here are some challenges and recommendations for addressing them:

1. Knowing different types of multilingual learners.

There are different typologies of multilingual learners, such as newly arrived students, long-term English learners, students with limited and interrupted education, etc., which can overwhelm teachers. Even two multilingual learners in the same content-area classroom might not have the same linguistic levels and needs.

Recommendation: It is very important to know who your multilingual learners are in the classroom and what their levels of proficiency are. This will help content-area teachers in intentional grouping and lesson scaffolding to address their unique needs.

2. Making multilingual learners visible in the classroom

Teaching content to multilingual learners might be challenging because the curriculum does not represent our multilingual learners.

Recommendation: Knowing students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their interests, and incorporating them into the daily lessons will help students see themselves in the content and engage with it more effectively.

3. Giving access to academic language

Teaching content-area-specific academic language might seem challenging and unnecessary when students are at the beginning stages of language acquisition.

Recommendation: Teaching academic language in context using visuals, gestures, and modeling will help not only newly arrived multilingual learners and long-term English learners but also all students who need to access academic language through multiple modalities.

4. Reducing Teacher-Talking Time

As teachers, we want to share a lot during our classes, which leads to lecturing, long directions, and disengaged and confused students.

Recommendation: To help multilingual learners process content and teacher directions, teachers should speak in concise sentences and use checks for understanding to make sure students understand the instructions and directions. Replacing "Does it make sense?" or "Do you understand?" with something like, "In the next activity, are we speaking or are we writing?" makes it more concrete to the students and reminds them of what they need to know for the upcoming task.

5. Make connections with families

Language barriers might seem to be challenging in making connections with families.

Recommendation: Use translation apps (ex. Talking Points, Parent Square, etc.) to communicate with families and build relationships with them. Our families are the first teachers to our students, which is why engaging families to share their expertise or experiences would help teachers get to know their multilingual students better.

Overall, addressing the challenges in working with multilingual learners and their families requires a combination of empathy, creativity, and commitment to equity. By implementing the recommended strategies, teachers can help multilingual learners feel more confident and connected to their school.

Looking Through the Lens of Assets

Françoise Thenoux is an accomplished educator and advocate with a career spanning nearly two decades. For more information about her work and resources, you can follow her on social media:

As a racialized immigrant in the U.S.A. and a native Spanish speaker ESL teacher with 20 years of teaching experience, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges of teaching English language learners. It's important to note that the term "ELL" is evolving, as it often reflects deficit narratives about students who are actually emergent bilinguals or multilinguals. These students bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom, yet the challenges they face often stem from the educational system and the teachers rather than themselves.

Biggest Challenges

1. Monolingual Teachers and Lack of Linguistic Knowledge

Many teachers in the U.S.A. are monolingual and lack the linguistic knowledge and understanding of the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition. This lack of preparation often leaves them unprepared to address the specific needs of emergent bilingual and multilingual students. The United States' educational system, which prides itself on monolingualism, often reflects a nationalistic mentality dating back to colonial times, intertwined with a white gaze and racism. This perspective sees students through a deficit lens rather than appreciating the richness and diversity that multilingual students bring.

2. Deficit Narratives

The prevalent deficit narratives in education view emergent bilingual and multilingual students as lacking rather than recognizing their bilingualism as an asset. This perspec-

tive can negatively impact students' self-esteem and academic performance. Instead of valuing their linguistic abilities, the focus is often on what these students can't do in English, which undermines their confidence and hinders their educational experience.

3. Lack of Teacher Preparation and Training

Many educators lack updated, research-based knowledge about language acquisition, translanguaging, and culturally responsive teaching. This gap in knowledge is a significant barrier to effectively teaching emergent bilingual and multilingual students. Teachers who are not equipped with these skills and understandings are less likely to implement strategies that support the linguistic and academic development of these students.

Recommendations

1. Professional Development in Linguistics and Language Acquisition

To address these challenges, it's crucial to invest in professional development that focuses on the cognitive processes of language acquisition, translanguaging strategies, and the principles of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers need to understand how languages are learned and how they can leverage students' native languages as resources in the classroom. This knowledge will enable them to create more inclusive and effective learning environments.

2. Adopting an Asset-Based Perspective

Shifting from a deficit-based to an asset-based perspective is essential. Educators must recognize and celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity that emergent bilingual and multilingual students bring. This includes valuing students' home languages and incorporating them into the curriculum. By doing so, teachers can help students build on their existing linguistic strengths while learning English.

3. Integrating Translanguaging Practices

Translanguaging, or using multiple languages in the classroom to support learning, is a powerful strategy for emergent bilingual and multilingual students. Teachers should be trained to integrate translanguaging practices into their teaching. This can involve allowing students to use their home languages to understand new concepts, encouraging bilingual peer support, and providing materials in multiple languages.

4. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Implementing culturally responsive teaching is critical for creating an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Teachers

should engage in continuous self-reflection and bias unpacking, develop an intersectional and anti-bias approach, and commit to understanding their students' cultures and histories deeply. This involves adapting the curriculum to be representative of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, creating lesson plans that reflect students' cultural ways of learning, and fostering genuine relationships with students and their families.

5. Policy Changes and Advocacy

On a broader scale, advocating policy changes that support bilingual education and the professional development of teachers in these areas is crucial. This includes lobbying for more resources, better teacher-training programs, and educational policies that recognize and support the linguistic diversity of students.

Thanks to Marie, Anastasia, and Francoise for contributing their thoughts! ■

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