How Do I Teach ELs with the Common Core?

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Abstract

English Learners (ELs) represent the fastest growing segment of K-12 student populations in the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002). Minority language speakers are quickly becoming the majority in schools today. Teaching this growing population to become proficient in English is becoming an increasing concern, especially with the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This paper explores some of the challenges that teachers of ELs face, as well as research solutions that have been developed to increase the learning environments for ELs. Lastly, this paper includes the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development (ELD) Standards as a resource for reading professionals to develop comprehensive language skills while teaching grade level content using the Common Core State Standards

# How Do I Teach ELs with the Common Core?

Introduction

With the increasing number of linguistically and culturally diverse English Learners (ELs) in schools nationwide, efforts have been made to address the need for ideas and solutions that will allow all students access to the curriculum, especially ELs. While working in schools in the last few years, the most often repeated question is, "How do I teach ELs with the Common Core?" Teachers are concerned about raising the level of text complexity, for instance, while consciously addressing the needs of ELs. They are concerned about the students meeting the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and they are also aware that their students' scores on standardized tests will potentially impact their performance evaluation, thus their income. As part of the Race to the Top funding, teacher's salaries are tied to the performance of their students. This financial link provides motivation for teachers to embark upon learning and implementing pedagogically appropriate ways to help close the achievement gap between groups of students.

Most notably, educators, educational institutions, and state and federal organizations are posing a transformed approach to educating ELs that embeds an approach that looks at what students are capable of accomplishing, linguistically and academically, instead of what they can't do. There is an urgency to continue to raise awareness about the challenges and implications that the CCSS have on the education of ELs. This article will present the status of the situation and will introduce and discuss the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development (ELD) Standards in an effort to provide a resource for reading professionals to implement the CCSS while developing English language skills.

Statistics about the Growing Numbers of ELs

The population of ELs is the fastest growing population in the U.S. (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). From the 2002-03 to the 2010-11 school year, the percentage of public school EL students increased from 4.1 to 4.7 million (U.S. Department of Education). Furthermore, by 2025 one out of every four students in the U.S. will be identified as an EL (Van Roekel, 2008). According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics National Survey, "Local Education Agency School Universe Survey, for the year 2010-2011," the percentage of school students who are ELs in many states ranges from less than 3 percent per state to 10 percent or more of the population (See map, Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of public school students who are English language learners (ELL), by state: School year 2010-11
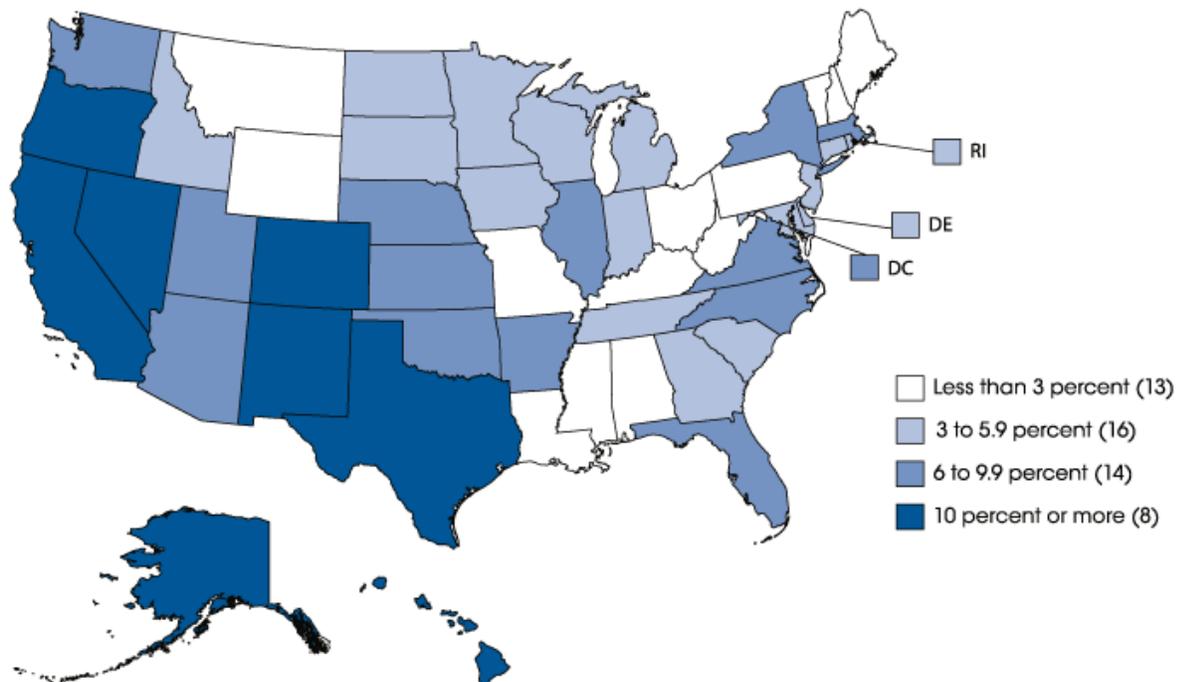
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency School Universe Survey," 2010-11. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2012*, table 47.

On this map, Florida is listed as having 6 to 9.99 percent (over two-hundred thousand students) of the school population as ELs. However, this statistic is skewed because within the state of Florida, the county with the highest concentration of ELs is Miami-Dade County. In the 2012-2013 school year, Miami-Dade County had 70,702 ELs enrolled in their English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) K-12 program out of 353,352 students, or approximately 30% of the state's entire EL population. For the district, there were 235,454 Hispanic students, approximately 2/3 of all the students (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, n.d). Such a large, growing population of ELs in Florida and in many other states only increases the demand for effective literacy instruction.

Perspectives and Challenges

The United States is becoming an increasingly multicultural and multilingual nation with a vast majority of the student population speaking languages other than English as their native language. This trend in immigration impacts schools and English language instruction because immigrant students come to school with oral, and oftentimes written, knowledge of a language other than the one used during instruction. The implementation of the CCSS in Florida (and in many other states throughout the country), as well as the strong emphasis on school, district, and statewide accountability, has greatly impacted the type of literacy instruction English learners are receiving. In *Literacy for All Students*, Sherry W. Powers (2012) argues that immigrant students may have been competent learners in their native country but then display poor performance here because they are

uncertain about the literacy environment (p. 201). This reality provides the platform for a potential mismatch between the cultures of ELs native countries and that of the U.S. as they pertain to reading materials and relevancy. ELs have varying degrees of English language proficiency that may impact their initial attempt of gaining linguistic awareness and skill transfer. Teaching literacy to this array of students requires understanding concepts of second language acquisition, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) strategies and reading professional development and practice. This type of pedagogical knowledge is mandated in Florida through the ESOL Endorsement and teacher certification requirements. Furthermore, the Federal Title III Grant requirements help protect the growing needs of ELs by requiring ESOL certification for those teachers working directly with ELs.

Researching Solutions

To find solutions to the teachers' questions on how to best educate ELs, several suggestions were found. Fortunately, there is not a pre-packaged educational program for this purpose. Instead, a comprehensive understanding of how language and content work together to provide cohesive instruction, instructional strategies, and relevant curricular materials should be used. For example, Helman (2009) suggests that instruction should recognize previous experience as strengths, and Powell and Rightmyer (2012) discuss the importance of bridging reading curricula to the students' world through the use of culturally responsive reading instruction. This type of instruction requires that teachers have an in-depth understanding of the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups in order to be able to situate the learning "…within the lived experiences and frames of references of students" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). It also requires that teachers are able to evaluate existing curricula in order to identify its multicultural strengths and weaknesses and thus, make the necessary adjustments in order to provide students with relevant instruction and materials (Gay, 2002). When evaluating curricula, Gay suggests that teachers analyze the accuracy, complexity, placement, purpose, significance, and authenticity of the narrative texts, among other factors. Taking all these factors into account when planning instructional experiences and selecting instructional materials will aid teachers in providing culturally relevant reading instruction to ELs, thus helping to increase their academic achievement (Gay, 2002).

Shanahan and August (2008) proffered that students would benefit from explicit instruction in components of reading, which are phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language. With explicit, structured instruction in these areas, students can learn at the same levels as English speakers (Goldenberg, 2010). For example, as it relates to comprehension, Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, and Barr (2014) argue that the following five factors influence the comprehension of ELs: attention, encoding (language, genre, vocabulary, or academic contexts differences), strategic processing and self-regulation, background knowledge, and motivation. Hence, when designing, implementing, and assessing ELs performance during reading comprehension tasks, these factors must be considered. Furthermore, when improving the vocabulary skills of ELs, Perez (1981) found that systematic and explicit

instruction in word meanings through the use of synonyms, antonyms, compound words and multiple meanings, led to improvements in the comprehension and oral reading of ELs. This type of instruction is beneficial when helping ELs understand vocabulary and, more specifically, when helping them learn content-specific vocabulary.

McLaughlin (2010) emphasized teaching text structures and others, such as Gay (2002), have suggested motivational and culturally relevant text. Moreover, Rubinstein-Ávila and Leckie (2014) discuss the importance of discipline-specific teacher's ability to make explicit "the language and literacy practices embedded in their discipline" (p.24). They suggest specific strategies that enable students to comprehend complex text. These include using text annotations, which starts with teachers reading a passage to model how to focus on aspects of text in their discipline. Then, students read and note questions and connections they make. For a third reading, students pair together to construct collaborative meaning. In Fisher, Frey, and Rothenberg (2008), Rubinstein–Ávila and Leckie also emphasize the importance of content area, which gives the opportunity for ELs to use academic language in class discussion to develop language and comprehension of disciplinary concepts. All of the above are good suggestions, but to meet the needs of large EL populations, at a time when the demands to meet high standards are a reality, a more systematic approach is needed. The World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development (ELD) Standards offers a framework for teachers that combines both content and language instruction to help all ELs, regardless of their language proficiency level, attain the required content knowledge to meet the standards.

English Language Proficiency Standards and the Common Core Standards-World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA)

The State of Florida, Florida's Department of Education and the State Board of Education recently announced that Florida has officially adopted the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards as the guiding student performance standards for language development. This set of standards will accompany the mandated Florida Standards, a modification of the CCSS for use in Florida schools. Florida became the 36th state to adopt the WIDA ELD Standards and to commit to providing a comprehensive instructional framework that utilizes both language and content standards as a foundation for teaching and learning. This decision was in part due to the growing awareness of the complex needs of the increasing EL student population.

"The WIDA ELD Standards represent the social, instructional, and academic language that students need to engage with peers, educators, and the curriculum in schools" (WIDA, 2012, p. 6). In addition, the goal of planning with a combined language and content standards approach is to allow ELs increased access to grade-level curriculum. "An important feature in the WIDA standards framework is an explicit connection to state content standards" (WIDA, 2012, p. 4). Furthermore, the ELD standards emphasize the importance of the development of social and academic language in social and instructional settings.

The ELD standards are characterized by defining the types of language that students will encounter in school: Standard 1- Social and Instructional language, Standard 2- the language of Language Arts, Standard 3- the language of Mathematics, Standard 4- the language of Science and Standard 5- the language of Social Studies. Standards one through five address the varieties of the social and academic language acquisition processes that ELs encounter as they progress through the continuum of developing competencies in English.

An example of the association and correspondence of content to language standards is exemplified in the following example (from the 2012 *Amplification of The English Language Development Standards, Kindergarten-Grade 12* resource guide, p. 101, www.wida.us).

ELD STANDARD 2: The Language of Language Arts　　EXAMPLE TOPIC: Bias

CONNECTION: *Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts, Reading: Informational Text, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas #8 (Grades 9–10):* Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

EXAMPLE CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGE USE: Students learn how to choose appropriate sources for a research project by examining texts (e.g., speech transcripts, websites, editorials) to identify author's bias.

COGNITIVE FUNCTION: Students at all levels of English language proficiency will EVALUATE author's bias.

	Level 1 Entering	Level 2 Emerging	Level 3 Developing	Level 4 Expanding	Level 5 Bridging	
READING	Locate language associated with fact and/or opinion from visually supported text with a partner using L1 or L2 and word banks (e.g., "I think", "I believe" v. "data", "fact")	Locate language associated with fact and opinion from visually supported text with a partner using word banks (e.g., "70% of Latinos" v. "almost all Latinos")	Locate language of opinion and bias from excerpts of texts following a model in small groups (e.g., "We as scientists agree..." v. "Scientists everywhere agree...")	Sort language of bias from texts (e.g., by validity of reasoning/evidence) following a model in small groups	Infer author's bias from texts in small groups	Level 6 – Reaching

TOPIC-RELATED LANGUAGE: Students at all levels of English language proficiency interact with grade-level words and expressions, such as: bias, claim, argument, relevant evidence, valid reasoning, stereotype

101　　GRADES 9–10

Each part explicitly outlines the development of language and content in a contextualized manner:

- WIDA ELD Standard 2- (ELD) The Language of Language Arts
- Connection: (CCSS) Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts, Reading: Informational Text, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas #8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient: identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.
- Example Topic: Bias

- <u>Example Context for Language Use</u>: Students learn how to choose appropriate sources for a research project by examining texts (e.g., speech transcripts, websites, editorials) to identify author's bias.
- <u>Cognitive Function</u>: Students at all levels of English language proficiency will EVALUATE author's bias.
- <u>Grade:</u> 9-10

As seen in this particular example, when combining the CCSS and ELD standards, EL students at all levels of language proficiency will be required to 'evaluate' the author's bias. This is accomplished by defining a cognitive function (to evaluate) that remains constant for all students. The differentiated instructional activities match what students can do at a particular language proficiency level, as defined by WIDA. The proficiency levels range from one to six: Level 1- Entering, Level 2- Emerging, Level 3- Developing, Level 4- Expanding, Level 5- Bridging and Level 6- Reaching. EL students progress through the continuum of language proficiency levels while acquiring content and more complex language structures. The example provided shows how instructional activities can be differentiated based on a students' language proficiency. A student who is Level 2- Emerging will not be required to accomplish a Level 5- Bridging activity as this is not appropriate for the level of language that the student possesses. EL students must have access to the curriculum at their language proficiency level as to increase competencies and decrease the perpetual achievement gap.

According to the report *The Condition of Education* (2013) by the National Center of Education Statistics, as of 2011 there continues to be an achievement gap in reading between non-English learners and English learners at the fourth and eighth-grade levels, thus making it paramount that educators find and implement new instructional methods in order to ensure that English learners acquire the necessary reading skills while at the same time meeting state-mandated standards. With this in mind, introducing and discussing WIDA's English Language Development standards serves as a stepping stone towards providing English learners appropriate education while continuing our commitment of implementing the CCSS.

Future Directions

There exists a need to build the knowledge base for classroom teachers on how to work with this diverse student population. Teachers need to be prepared how to 1) assess ELs' language levels, 2) use strategies that build social and academic language and 3) differentiate lessons so that ELs are participating at their highest level of language competency while learning grade level content. Emphasis on the development of academic language, the language that appears in other academic areas and the discipline-specific, content vocabulary is also needed. As the foundation for understanding the language development of ELs, teachers must have an in-depth understanding of the two types of language proficiency: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills refers to the ability to communicate through conversational English. At this level of

English proficiency, students can engage in regular, everyday conversations with their peers because they possess social language skills in English. However, these skills are not sufficient for the linguistic demands of academic content. On the other hand, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency refers to the ability to understand complex academic language necessary to acquire academic content. It is necessary for teachers to understand the distinction between these two types of language proficiencies in order to set appropriate expectations and adapt instruction based on students' English language proficiency levels (Cummins, 1999).

To close the achievement gap between ELs and native speakers of English, there must be a means to bring this information about effective practices and language acquisition processes to teachers. Mandates from State Departments of Education that require teachers get the necessary professional development so that they are able to teach ELs, such as the one instituted in Florida, a state who has had a tremendous influx of ELs for over 30 years, will help ensure that teachers are prepared to use effective practices with their EL student population and that they understand the language acquisition processes that these students go through. However, such mandates will require much professional development and thus, should be provided at the district level in order to guarantee their quality. The involvement of Reading Coaches would also be beneficial, as they will be able to offer their expertise on reading development. The best way to insure that there is quality professional development, however, is to have this training take place at universities, where experienced faculty in both second language acquisition and reading development and instruction can work together to provide teachers with effective practices that promote the language and cognitive development of ELs.

Lastly, the field would greatly benefit from further research studies on ways to improve EL's achievement in the Language Arts. Quasi-experimental, pretest/post-test designs with the treatment focused on strategies that incorporate reading and writing would perhaps be the most appropriate. One such study focused on using a strategy called Reciprocal Text Structure Mapping (Fine, 2013) took place in a predominantly Haitian high school in Miami. This study found that students were able to increase their vocabulary and writing using evidence from the informational text.

Conclusion

The growing EL student population in the country is a reality and teachers must be prepared to provide effective instruction that meets the needs of these learners while at the same time meeting the learning standards adopted by their state and/or district. One of the most effective approaches of doing this is by marrying language development with content instruction. Ensuring that we are aiming for this level of cognitive development for all students will help make the content accessible and equitable thus providing all students, regardless of their language background, with the opportunity and tools to exceed and reach full potential as learners.

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