



# Just for the ASKing!

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the interests of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. The focus of this issue is on what we are learning about teaching English language learners. Web resource recommendations related to the impact of the **Common Core State Standards** on the teaching and learning of English language learners are included.

## Learning to Teach English Language Learners



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

In the early years of my teaching career, the guidance counselor brought a new student to our classroom. Sonia, from Venezuela, had just arrived in the United States, and spoke no English. Sonia and I shook hands and smiled; I introduced Sonia to the class and showed her to her seat. As I walked back to the front of the room, I asked myself, “Now what?” There was no direction, no program, no materials. I was on my own. I remember taping English words all around the room next to items such as the clock, door, window, book case, desk, etc. so that Sonia could start learning some English words. Since I didn’t think Sonia could learn social studies (or perhaps it was that I didn’t think I could teach Sonia social studies), my primary goal was to make sure that she was not afraid. I asked the Spanish teacher for sentences I could use to interact with Sonia to make her feel comfortable. Over time, Sonia learned to speak English, and by the end of the year, she had made considerable progress. Her fluency improved and her

confidence grew. It was apparent to me that Sonia’s English-speaking skills came primarily from listening and talking with others and not from any formal instruction from me.

Over the years, we have come a long way in learning how to work with English language learners. The literature is replete with research findings, though sometimes conflicting and often politically charged, that provide direction to classroom practitioners about best practice for teaching non-English speakers. Given what we now know, we no longer have to rely on guesswork. Sonia would be much better off in today’s classroom than she was back then.

### What Have We Learned?

- While there are exceptions, it generally takes 3-5 years for English language learners (ELLs) to achieve conversational fluency in English, and 4-7 years for them to become proficient in academic English.
- Just as all English speakers are not the same, English language learners are different in many ways. Professor Stacey J. Lee from the University of Wisconsin-Madison writes: “Students from immigrant families are diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, language, background, English proficiency, immigration status, and social class. These differences make a profound difference in how they negotiate schooling.”
- While several states, including Arizona, California, and Massachusetts, have laws forbidding it, Claude

Goldenberg reports that 2006 reviews of the literature by the National Literacy Panel and the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), reveal strong data that teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English.

- Ivannia Soto, Whittier College associate professor, points out: “Listening and speaking are especially important because they are scaffolds for reading and writing.”
- English language learners are frequently placed in classes to help them learn basic English; it is equally important for them to learn academic vocabulary in mainstream content classes.
- As with all students, involving English learners’ families in their children’s schooling results in greater school success.

### **Points to Ponder**

- English language learners do not need simplified and isolated instruction; for most, language is their primary barrier to learning.
- Non-English speakers can learn conceptually; they simply need more time to get there.
- It is important to dignify students by pronouncing their names correctly as well as learning about their countries of origin.
- In some cultures, it is considered boastful or even conceited to volunteer an answer in a class discussion; it is likewise considered rude to answer a question unless it is posed directly to them by the teacher.
- Since students learn social English much more quickly than academic English; do not assume that students are proficient until they are adept at handling the necessary academic vocabulary.
- As always, we should gather information about each student’s educational experience (subjects taken, content covered, subjects that were easier or harder to master, lessons learned).
- Include information and examples from the cultures of all students in daily classroom life.
- Take into account the “double challenges” that English language learners face: learning academic content and learning English at the same time. Provide specific background knowledge, especially in social studies and science classes.
- Display multi-step directions so that students can check their progress as they complete tasks.
- Include direct instruction and practice for students so they can determine what is important in texts, lectures, and discussions.
- Be mindful of antecedents, slang, and colloquialisms, and use the active voice during instruction; repeat sentences exactly instead of paraphrasing because students have to start their translations all over when a new sentence is used.
- Encourage students to become involved in extracurricular activities in order to promote language acquisition, learn social skills, and build confidence.

Claude Goldenberg, professor of education at Stanford University, provides specific recommendations for instructing English language learners in his article “Teaching English Language Learners,” published in the Summer 2008 issue of *American Educator*.

- Plan predictable and consistent routines including lists, diagrams, and easy-to-follow schedules.
- Use graphic organizers.
- Incorporate visual clues, pictures, and physical gestures to enhance learning during direct instruction.
- Identify and clarify key words and difficult vocabulary; research supports explicit vocabulary instruction.
- Provide opportunities for students to summarize and paraphrase passages they have read.
- Plan frequent interactions between teacher and students (preferably in small groups) as well as student-to-student conversations.
- Adjust instruction, vocabulary, rate of speech, and sentence complexity on an individual basis to meet each student’s personal learning needs.

As I prepared to write this issue of *Just for the ASKing!*, I asked several accomplished individuals who had achieved success in their work with English language learners to share with me what they felt was most important in their work. One veteran teacher wrote: “If you don’t speak English, it can be terrorizing. My students had to know that when they entered my classroom they were safe. I wouldn’t yell, I wouldn’t make fun of them or let others do it, I wouldn’t criticize them for not understanding, and I would help them address any problem in the school, even if it wasn’t about my class.” A veteran principal concurred saying: “It all starts with relationship building and an important part of the relationship is believing in each student’s capability to learn.” A third educator noted: “One of my goals is to develop the capacity of my students to speak fluently, without having to think about it at a conscious level.” And a fourth practitioner added: “I have to remember that achievement of high standards happens one learner at a time.”

One of the most compelling and interesting findings in the research on English language learners is that there are many similarities between instruction that works for English speakers and non-English speakers. In *Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners*, Paula Rutherford uses those findings to present guidelines for understanding how non-English speakers learn and strategies to engage them in the classroom. In that text you will find, in jargon-free language, the following information related to English language learners:

- Social and cultural influences
- An array of linguistic proficiency
- Factors that influence English language acquisition
- Getting to know your students as individuals
- General guidelines for instructional decisions
- Sheltered language
- Vocabulary development
- Teacher and classmate speech patterns
- Student work support
- Student interactions
- Challenges in social studies, science, math, and ELA

Recommended online sources of information are:

- **National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition (NCELA):** [www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu)
- **Colorín Colorado:** [www.colorincolorado.org/](http://www.colorincolorado.org/)
- **Common Core State Standards for ELLs:** [www.colorincolorado.org/educators/common\\_core/](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/common_core/)
- **Reading Rockets:** [www.readingrockets.org/](http://www.readingrockets.org/)
- **Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners:** [www.corestandards.org/assets/application-for-english-learners.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/application-for-english-learners.pdf)
- **Implications and Implementation Considerations of the CCSS for English Language Learners:** [www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/CommonCorePresentation-MRivera.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/CommonCorePresentation-MRivera.pdf)
- **The Common Core Challenges for ELLs:** [www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl\\_feb12\\_goldenberg.pdf](http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl_feb12_goldenberg.pdf)

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