



# Developing Academic Literacy in Adolescent English Language Learners

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Educators of English learners (ELs) should have two goals: to accelerate their development of academic English and to strengthen their content knowledge. Research has shown that ELs improve their academic English skills and learn more of the content of school subjects through an integrated instructional approach (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Francis, 2011; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006; Short, Fidelman & Louguit, 2012). This integrated approach provides the means for English learners to achieve rigorous standards such as the Common Core when they receive systematic content and language instruction and assessment along with a solid, research-based curriculum. Through this type of program, they advance their academic language and literacy skills and thus are better prepared for college and careers.

## Understanding English Learners in Middle School

Most English learners in middle school are already on the path to academic literacy. They have not stalled; rather, they are making steady progress, but perhaps at different rates. Second-language acquisition takes time and requires understanding of what English learners bring to our classrooms.

Some English learners arrive in the United States without literacy in their native language. Yet many are placed in classrooms with teachers who are unprepared to teach basic literacy skills to adolescents (McGraner & Saenz, 2009). These newcomers need a developmental program of language and literacy with direct instruction in phonics, vocabulary, grammar, and the fundamentals of reading and writing. This is important to note because standards such as the Common Core do not plan for students at Grade 6 or higher who need basic instruction in phonics and grammar.

Other ELs have grown up in the U.S., but for reasons such as family mobility, intermittent school attendance, or limited access to ESL or bilingual instruction, they have not developed the degree of academic literacy required for reading and understanding middle school texts or for interacting productively in instruction with teachers and classmates. Some of these students may need a targeted intervention.

Still other ELs enter middle school with native-language literacy. They have a strong foundation that can facilitate their academic English growth. Their prior knowledge and some literacy skills can transfer from the native language to their new one. They may have already mastered some of the literacy expectations called for in the Common Core and other standards but they need to learn and apply academic English.

What, then, do ELs from all these different backgrounds need as they move through the middle school years?

## Explicit Instruction in English Vocabulary and Structures

We know that the connections between language, literacy, and academic achievement grow stronger as students progress through the grades (Anstrom et al., 2010), and that the development of proficiency in academic English is a complex process for adolescent ELs. The Common Core has increased the rigor of instruction. Middle school ELs must develop literacy skills for each content area in their second language as they simultaneously try to comprehend and apply content area concepts through that second language (García & Godina, 2004; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Therefore, even while

we focus on developing literacy and bolstering content area knowledge, we must provide explicit instruction in English semantics, syntax, phonology, pragmatics, and discourse levels of the language as they are applied in school (Bailey, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004).

**Personal Connections to Learning** The complexity of second language acquisition is not the only variable in becoming literate in English. Identity, engagement, motivation, and life outside school are other important factors (Moje, 2006; Moje et al., 2004; Tatum, 2005, 2007).

Adolescents engage more with texts that they have chosen themselves, and they read material above their level if it is of interest. Engagement and motivation increase when students can see themselves in the characters, events, and settings of the materials. That is why multicultural literature and expository text on numerous topics should be part of the curriculum. Moreover, teachers must also push students beyond their comfort zone and ensure they engage with complex text and a variety of genres at their current reading level and above.

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Self-perceptions (e.g., strong vs. weak reader), personal goals, and opportunities to participate in collaborative literacy activities with classmates also influence motivation. Out-of-school experiences and literacies play an important role too. Stressors outside of school—hectic home lives, work, lack of study space, peer pressures—may diminish students' interest in and ability to develop English literacy. Positive out-of-school interactions with English literacy (e.g., the Internet, music, work) however may strengthen their engagement with literacy practices in the classroom.

## Promoting English Literacy Development

A number of research reports have examined more than two decades of rigorous studies of English second language development (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee et al., 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). These reports provide a great deal of valuable information about adolescent ELs and the curricular content and instructional practices that work best to promote their academic language and literacy skills. The following are among the key findings:

- 1. Transfer of Skills** Certain native-language skills transfer to English literacy, including phonemic awareness, comprehension and language-learning strategies, and knowledge learned through oral interaction. If students have opportunities to learn and maintain their native language literacy, they may acquire English more quickly. Concepts that students learn through their native language is learned knowledge. ELs may require assistance to articulate this knowledge in English, but they do not have to relearn it. The transfer process—of knowledge from one language to another—however, is not automatic (Gersten, Brengelman, & Jiménez, 1994). It requires teachers to make explicit links to students' prior knowledge and to prompt students to make connections, using the cognitive resources they have.
- 2. Native Language Literacy** Academic literacy in the native language facilitates the development of academic literacy in English. For example, once students have enough English proficiency (e.g., vocabulary, sense of sentence structure) to engage with text, those who have learned comprehension strategies (e.g., finding the main idea, making inferences) in their native language have the cognitive background to use those strategies in their new language (August & Shanahan, 2006). Similarly if they are able to make a claim and counter-argument in their native language, they understand cognitively how to do so in English.
- 3. Academic English** Teaching the five components of proficient reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000)—to English learners is necessary but not sufficient for developing their academic literacy. ELs need to develop oral language proficiency, language functions, and academic discourse patterns. In this way students can participate in classroom talk, such as evaluating a historical perspective or presenting evidence for a scientific claim, and therefore meet the speaking and listening standards defined in the Common Core.

As a corollary to this point, students benefit from the integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in lessons. As they develop knowledge in one language domain, they reinforce their learning in other domains.

- 4. Instructional Accommodations** High-quality instruction for English learners is similar to high-quality instruction for native English-speaking students. However, beginning- and intermediate-level ELs need frequent instructional and linguistic supports to help them access core content (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010). Even advanced students need accommodations on occasion.
- 5. Enhanced and Explicit Vocabulary Development** English learners need enhanced vocabulary development. Direct teaching of specific words can facilitate vocabulary growth and lead to increased reading comprehension for English language learners (Carlo et al., 2004). However, many middle school ELs need to learn many more vocabulary words than teachers have time to teach. As a result, specific-word instruction must be supplemented with explicit instruction in strategies for word learning, such as contextual and word part analysis and use of native-language cognates. Helping ELs develop knowledge of words, roots, affixes, and word relationships is crucial if they are to understand topics in the content areas well enough to increase both their academic knowledge and reading comprehension (Graves, 2006).

## Designing Appropriate Curricula for ELs

Comprehensive literacy instruction programs for English learners must incorporate and provide extensive practice in the following elements:

- lesson objectives based on state content and language standards, such as the Common Core and WIDA, CELD, ELDA21, or ELPS
- explicit attention to general academic and cross-curricular vocabulary, domain-specific terminology, word parts (roots and affixes), and word relationships
- developmental reading instruction tied to a wide range of expository and narrative text genres that increase in complexity over time
- explicit writing instruction for all other content areas
- instruction for listening, speaking, and discourse level interaction
- grammar instruction
- teaching practices that tap students' prior knowledge and build background for new topics
- explicit instruction in learning strategies and cognitive processing skills
- instruction in typical subject matter tasks
- comprehension checks and opportunities for review

In effective programs, teachers use specific techniques, such as those in the SIOP Model for sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013), to make the presentation of new content comprehensible for English learners and to advance their academic language development. For example:

- Teachers make the standards-based lesson objectives explicit to the students and connect objectives to Guiding Questions and unit themes.
- Before a reading or a writing activity, teachers activate students' prior knowledge and link to past learning. They preteach vocabulary and build background appropriate to the content and task at hand.
- Teachers chunk the presentation of information according to students' proficiency levels; utilize realia, pictures, video clips, and demonstrations; teach note-taking skills with specific organizers; and include time for review and reflection.
- To differentiate instruction as well as build competence and the ability to work independently, teachers scaffold subject matter tasks and classroom routines by using, for example, sentence and paragraph frames graduated to students' proficiency levels or graphic organizers to record and organize information.
- Language skills are sequenced and taught explicitly as well as integrated into lessons on other skills so that students have every opportunity to grow their academic English. Students practice using language functions, for example, with sentence starters while interacting with classmates.
- To ensure that learning is taking place and students are making expected progress, teachers check ELs' comprehension frequently during instruction. They use multiple measures to monitor progress on a more formal basis, with assessments that accommodate the students' developing language skills and lead to timely reteaching.

### Applying the Research

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides all these elements of successful instruction for English learners. The program uses Common Core State Standards for language, literacy, and content as the foundation for the lesson objectives and to inform each unit's Guiding Question (on topical issues like "What happens when cultures meet?" and "What makes the environment so valuable?"). These Guiding Questions engage and motivate students to share possible answers as they read. They also offer students opportunities to build vocabulary, listening, and speaking skills in context over time and to respond more thoughtfully as they gain new perspectives, information, and data.

To promote growth in vocabulary, the program teaches key content-specific words from the texts and important academic words (e.g., conflict, sequence, however) that students can apply across content areas. English learners also engage in a wide range of vocabulary-building activities with multiple opportunities to practice new words and determine word meanings. Daily vocabulary routines help students use independent word-learning strategies.

Lesson plans are built around techniques that are appropriate for English learners. For example, reading lessons build background first, using pictures and videos from the Digital Library. Academic discussions of what was read involve collaborative learning tasks with pairs and small groups to promote the use of oral language. Readings are linked to writing lessons so students learn to persuade, defend claims, and conduct research.

Academic Language Frames further support English learners' language development. These frames provide structure for using language to accomplish academic tasks. Because the frames are graduated in language complexity, students of all proficiencies can interact fully in class. Each level of *Inside* also includes daily lessons in English grammar and sentence structure so that students receive systematic, comprehensive language instruction. For newcomers, phonics instruction is also available.

With each selection, the program targets a specific language function, such as Clarify Information. Students hear multiple language models to help them conceptualize the function in action and participate in songs, chants and other audio lessons to try out the language function in a risk-free way.

Finally, the lessons offer Multi-Level Strategies, techniques modified to give students at different levels of language proficiency access to the text and to support their participation in academic tasks.

### Conclusion

Effective instruction for English learners requires both high expectations and specialized strategies to ensure success. The standards base of *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* along with its structured language supports, Multi-Level Strategies, and other scaffolding techniques allows English learners to accelerate their growth in academic language and literacy.