In the STARlight
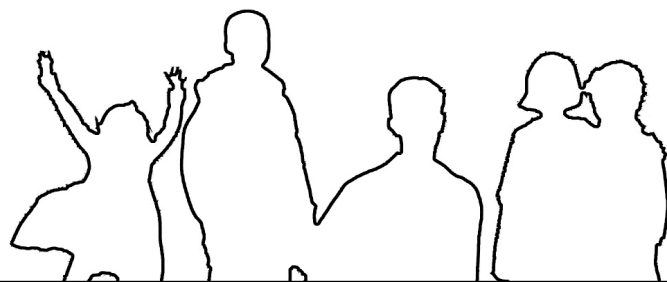
Research & Resources for English Learner Achievement

Research to Inform English Language Development in Secondary Schools

+ Key Points
+ Highlights
+ Implications
+ Resources

Written by:
Kate Kinsella, Ed.D.
Researcher, Author, and Practitioner
Center for Teacher Efficacy
San Francisco State University

Prepared by:
Yee Wan, Ed.D.
Santa Clara County
Office of Education

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Students of Today Achieving Results

Advanced, if not native-like proficiency in English, is imperative for language minority youths whose educational and professional aspirations hinge upon communicative competence in the dominant language. The ability to converse in English with relative ease is not a bold enough instructional goal. New national K-12 standards and assessments, and an increasingly sophisticated workplace exert tremendous pressures upon school-aged English learners to develop accurate fluency, or the ability to effortlessly produce error-free, contextually-appropriate language (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010).

As we design second-language instruction for adolescent English learners that fosters accurate fluency in speaking and writing, we must look to classroom principles and practices that are supported by available research.

1. Augment core English-Language Arts classes with a dedicated English Language Development period

Current research and best practices for Long-Term English Learners recommend clustered placement into grade-level content classes, including English-Language Arts, mixed with English proficient students. English learners need to interact academically with skilled English communicators to learn a target-like version of spoken English. To advance in their academic standing, they must also have access to rigorous curricula at their grade level (Olsen, 2010; Scarcella, 2003). English learners additionally require a dedicated time for second-language learning and practice. A number of researchers have observed that effective content teaching is not synonymous with effective language teaching (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Ramirez, 1992). In fact, due to time constraints, curricular complexities and aggressive testing schedules, English-Language Arts and other secondary content standards invariably trump instruction in relevant English speaking and listening skills. There is ample evidence that like other complex learning, proficiency in English requires targeted, systematic and explicit instruction in a clear course of second language study, rather than ad hoc, incidental lessons within another discipline (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010). Without informed, intentional instruction in how English works -- vocabulary, word usage, grammatical features, and syntactic structures -- and meaningful daily structured rehearsals, older English learners will not develop a competent command of English (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010).

2. Explicitly teach language elements within meaningful content

In their analysis of 77 studies focused on the effectiveness of second-language teaching practices, Norris and Ortega (2006) drew strong conclusions regarding the decided benefits of form-focused, explicit teaching methods for older English learners. The researchers pinpointed three essential elements of explicit language teaching: 1) conscientiously directing students' attention to a new word, grammatical form, or language rule; 2) clearly explaining and demonstrating the language element; and 3) providing ample opportunities for use of the language target in meaningful, scaffolded and monitored contexts.

Indirect, implicit language teaching methods have a comparatively negligible impact on student language learning. For example, if a teacher merely leads choral repetition of a model response to a lesson question but doesn't dissect the sentence for students and point out the grammatical and vocabulary targets, English learners are unlikely to independently extract the linguistic principles and produce an equally strong statement. Lightbown and Spada (2008) argue that instruction that helps English learners take careful notice of specific linguistic elements in lesson content increase the likelihood that students will acquire them.

3. Utilize consistent instructional routines

Adolescent English learners must cope with the double demands of learning rigorous content in core courses and a second language (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Compounding this curricular complexity is the diversity of instructional strategies utilized by teachers within and across the subject areas. When English learners are routinely adjusting to new classroom expectations and instructional practices, little cognitive capital is available to grapple with new concepts, language and skills. A consistent set of instructional routines with clear teacher and student roles, steps, and language targets maximize student engagement and second language development (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Goldenberg, 2008)

4. Orchestrate peer interactions with clear language targets

Oral language proficiency underscores advanced academic literacy (August & Shanahan, 2006); English learners understandably struggle to read and write what they cannot articulate verbally. To make second-language acquisition gains, English learners must have daily opportunities to communicate using more sophisticated social and academic English. However, when assigned interactive activities without established language goals, adolescent English learners focus more on "friendly discourse" than on producing and eliciting conceptually competent responses with linguistic accuracy (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Orchestrating peer interactions with clear roles, language targets, accountability for implementation, and meticulous monitoring ensures gains in oral language proficiency (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).

5. Monitor language production and provide productive feedback on errors

A critical component of effective language instruction is teacher feedback to students about the accuracy of their language use. Without form-focused instruction and productive feedback on their spoken and written English, adolescent English learners will never get a handle on their persistent and potentially stigmatizing errors (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). As English learners work independently or collaboratively on tasks, teachers must actively monitor their language production, carefully reading what they are writing and listening to what they are contributing. In so doing, educators can more adeptly assess students' grasp of language targets and note unanticipated challenges in need of subsequent feedback.

A prevalent approach to spoken error correction is "recasting," or merely reiterating a student's utterance without pointing out the problem. Research indicates that when teachers rely on this implicit approach, English learners are unlikely to perceive that they are being corrected (Lyster & Ranta,1997). They are more apt to comprehend that the teacher is either validating their response or repeating it audibly for the class. Efforts to elicit the correct form and metalinguistic prompts have been shown to be more effective for short-term and long-term language learning than simple recasts. When students have linguistic awareness developed from conscientious instruction and structured practice, a teacher can more easily guide them in identifying an error and self-correcting.

Conclusion

With the burgeoning population of English learners in the United States, we cannot rely on good intentions, common teaching wisdom, and curricula designed for proficient English speakers to adequately address their acute second-language learning needs. The staggering numbers of Long-Term English Learners entering our secondary schools should serve as a wake-up call for serious introspection about existing English learner curriculum and instruction. Effective English language development has been proven by current research and promising practices to be far more than just "good teaching." We must provide a dedicated context for explicit and informed language instruction that re-engages discouraged English learners and equips them with the communicative confidence and competence to realize their academic and personal goals.

Adapted with permission from Kinsella, K. (2011). English 3D: Teaching Guide. Scholastic.

Implications for Teachers

Support adolescent English learners in making tremendous strides in their scholarly demeanor and academic language proficiency:

- Model eloquent academic register: Most English Learners have limited opportunities to hear complex and articulate English for varied purposes outside the classroom. They depend on every teacher to provide a "real time" model of proficient English for advanced social and academic purposes.

- Don't code switch between academic register and casual vernacular (OK, you guys… I need you to get in groups right now. Really. What is your perspective on this issue?). It gives students very confusing messages about appropriate language use in social, academic, and professional contexts.

- Devote a section of your classroom real estate to academic language that students can readily draw from to competently engage in routine classroom interactions. Prominently displaying high-use expressions for daily communicative tasks such as asking for clarification or articulating a perspective will prompt appropriate register.

- Analyze lessons for optimal verbal production opportunities and structure accountable partner or group interactions with clear language targets and relevant response frames.

- Praise and incentivize spontaneous use of previously taught language. If a student skillfully uses a recently taught term while offering a point of view during a class discussion, take a moment to commend the adept language use.

- Be diligent about structured academic interaction routines. To make measurable strides in their English communicative competence, students need to consistently produce and hear rich, varied, and increasingly complex sentences. If you fluctuate between occasionally orchestrating articulate discourse using lesson response frames and regularly allowing students to revert to casual vernacular, they will be confused, inefficient, and less likely to internalize course language objectives.

- Don't be apprehensive about correcting verbal production errors when you have already devoted time to formally teaching a particular word, expression or grammatical form. Instead of simply repeating the utterance correctly, elicit the correct form or rule from the student or the class with a clear prompt: e.g., I heard you say "Steve Jobs invent the iPad." The iPad is 2 years old. Think about how you can correct your verb use."

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In the STARlight

STUDENTS OF TODAY ACHIEVING RESULTS

Questions for Reflection

1. Does your school provide a dedicated advanced course of English language study for English learners who have stalled in their second-language development and/or who have recently been reclassified with disappointing state exam scores?

2. The Common Core assessments focus on informational reading and evidence-based argumentative writing. How will the curricula you are currently using promote second language gains, and adequately prepare English learners for the language, speaking and writing demands of these assessments?

3. What, if any, research-informed instructional routines has your school site established across the disciplines to support English learners in learning vocabulary, reading text, participating in unified-class discussions, and productively collaborating with peers?

4. How could your unified staff serve as eloquent and articulate models of academic English register throughout the school day for students with limited exposure to advanced English outside the classroom?

5. What criteria should coaches and administrators consider when observing lessons for evidence checks of effective verbal engagement of English learners?

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