The growing number of students in U.S. schools who don't speak English has brought the issue of educating such students to the forefront of discussions in education, particularly because the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have made schools accountable for the achievement of various cohorts. Although most of these students enter school eager to learn and want to take advantage of the education their parents have told them about, the reality is that as a group, they have experienced persistent underachievement and, by the time they reach the secondary level, a pattern of failure. On nearly every measure, students who are English language learners (ELLs) tend to lag behind their native-English-speaking peers and demonstrate significant achievement gaps on state and national assessments (Olson, 2003; Snow & Òñcarosa, 2003).

Many educators, especially at the secondary level, may be puzzled about why so many ELLs are behind academically and seem slow in attaining grade-level English proficiency. Many of these students have not had the kinds of instructional opportunities they need to make adequate progress. Despite all the school reform that is discussed and enacted—much of it laudable—learning depends greatly on the teacher-student relationship, especially for at-risk students (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

As principals know too well, there is a shortage of teachers who have been prepared to work effectively with ELLs. Students have difficulty in school for a number of reasons, but certainly the mismatch between student needs and teacher preparation must be acknowledged as a contributing factor. Although NCLB calls for highly qualified teachers in every core academic classroom by 2006, the supply of certified English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual teachers is too small to meet the demand. Less than 13% of teachers in the United States have received professional development to prepare them for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

To compensate, principals use short-term solutions that have long-term negative consequences for students and schools. These include hiring less-qualified teachers, using substitute teachers, requiring reading specialists to fill the void, increasing class size, and asking teachers to teach outside their field of preparation (Vogt & Shearer, 2003; Wainer, 2004). It is not uncommon to find untrained paraeducators acting as the English language teachers for these students (Lavadenz, 1994; Pickett, 1999; Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004).

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As a result, many ELLs receive much of their instruction from teachers who have not had preservice or inservice training that prepares them to address ELLs’ academic and second language development needs. This situation hinders ELLs’ academic success at best, and at worst, it has lead to the inappropriate placement of some ELLs in special education classes (Echevarria, Powers, & Elliott, 2004). When instruction does not make sense to students, they fail to learn; teachers often believe the failure to learn indicates a problem within the student rather than in the instructional context.

Sustained, focused professional development for staff members is a solution that offers short- and long-term benefits. This article is intended to provide educators with guidance for improving the achievement of ELLs through high-quality professional development. Many of the techniques and strategies shown to be effective for ELLs are also good for all students; an investment in improving teacher practice will benefit all students.

What is it that teachers need to know to help ELLs succeed? There are several areas that are important for working effectively with these youngsters. They include understanding second language acquisition and the importance of academic English as well as understanding the type of instructional practices that enhance learning for ELLs.

**Importance of Academic Language**

Some immigrant students enter school with strong academic preparation and can transfer their knowledge to the courses they are taking as their English proficiency develops. Others have limited formal schooling; approximately 20% of all limited-English-proficient students at the high school level and 12% at the middle school level have missed two or more years of schooling since age six (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). More than one-third of Hispanic students ages 15–17 are enrolled below grade level (Jamieson, Gur, & Martinez, 2001). Still other students were born in the United States but speak a language other than English at home. Although most of these students learn English during their elementary school years, some have only acquired social language skills (i.e., basic reading and conversational skills) and are less proficient in the level they need for school tasks, such as reading textbooks, participating in content-related classroom discussions, and writing research reports.

As ELLs reach the secondary level, they lag significantly behind their English-speaking peers. It is tempting to look to the students or their families for reasons of persistent underachievement. Although economic, sociopolitical, and cultural factors affect student performance, the learning context is also an important contributing factor. Age-appropriate knowledge of the English language is a prerequisite for attaining content standards. Students who have limited formal schooling and below-grade-level literacy are most at risk for educational failure.

The distinction between social or conversational ability and the ability to use academic language is important to understand. Instruction should focus on ways to make students successful and make the rigorous content understandable. Teachers often assume that because students
can converse well in English, they should also be able to complete academic tasks and assignments. Conversational ability is acquired relatively quickly (taking one to three years), but academic proficiency—the ability to read with comprehension, analyze material, and draw conclusions in English—is what students need for success in school and is more complex, taking between five and nine years to develop completely (Cummins, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 2002). This longer length of time is particularly difficult to provide for secondary students who face graduation course requirements and high school exit exams.

Academic English involves much more than vocabulary development, although that is a significant element. Students must be taught other language elements as well (Short & Echevarria, 2004/2005):

- Language functions: for example, formulate questions and ask predictions
- Language skills: for example, scan a reading passage and draft a report
- Grammar and language structures: for example, root words and adverbs
- Tasks needed to complete work: for example, share with a partner and count off by twos.

These aspects of language are needed to complete academic tasks and assignments and to participate in classroom routines. Often assumed to be known and understood by all students, these language elements must be explicitly taught to ELLs to ensure their participation in learning and to facilitate academic success.

**Helping Students Succeed**

Sheltered instruction is a way of teaching that provides ELLs access to the core curriculum and emphasizes academic English. Until recently, sheltered instruction (called specially designed academic instruction in English in some regions)—which is advocated as the approach to use to teach content concepts to English language learners—consisted of a set of techniques and strategies that were based on research, such as use of graphic organizers, cooperative learning, visuals, supplementary materials, and slower speech. Its weakness was that the field lacked agreement of what constituted a high-quality sheltered lesson, and in practice, it was a pick-and-choose approach whereby teachers used the techniques they were most comfortable with and ignored others.

Through a federally funded research project, a model for sheltered instruction was developed: the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) Model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; 2004). The SIOP Model describes specific features of teaching that have been shown to improve the academic literacy of ELLs (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, in press). The observation protocol has 30 items grouped into eight components that are essential for making content comprehensible for ELLs.

When provided with a model for systematic implementation of high quality instruction for ELLs, teachers are able to consistently use teaching practices that benefit students (Echevarria, Short & Powers, in press). In one elementary school, chronically underachieving students made consistent and significant yearly gains on standardized tests when the SIOP Model was implemented to a high degree by all teachers. The observation protocol allowed the principal and literacy coach to observe teachers and provide them with concrete feedback on their lessons, and the lesson planning guide helped teachers focus on daily use of the features of the SIOP model. As a result, 86% of the students in grade 3 who had been enrolled in the school during the three years the SIOP Model was implemented scored at or above grade level on the state standards assessment (Echevarria, 2005). These outcomes demonstrate the power of a focused, sustained professional development program—the marriage of a valid instructional model with consistent practice. Similar comprehensive professional development programs are being implemented in secondary schools.

Effective instruction for ELLs is characterized by a number of practices, including:

**Focused instruction.** Students and teachers alike benefit from each lesson having explicit content and language objectives. The content objective is the knowledge or skill that students attain and is based on standards. The language objective ensures that necessary English language development is not overlooked and that some aspect of language is practiced daily. For example, content objectives may be: “Students will
be able to explain how a story is often told chronologically and must be read from beginning to end; students will be able to explain that a nonfiction book contains information that may be accessed randomly using the table of contents or index.” The language objective may be: “In pairs, students will write one characteristic of fiction and one of nonfiction.”

Standards-based objectives are tied to an assessment, and instruction is geared toward having students attain the objectives. In our work, Deborah Short and I have found that this clear link is often missing (Short & Echevarria, 1999). Effective teachers report that their instruction is more focused when they have objectives written on the board, and they also report that students are more motivated and engaged when the point of the lesson is unambiguous.

Explicit vocabulary development. An essential aspect of reading is vocabulary development (National Reading Panel Report, 2000). For students who are learning English and who don’t have the same amount of English vocabulary that native speakers do, it becomes even more important. ELLs need to have vocabulary words written, pronunciation modeled, words repeated numerous times and in a variety of ways, and opportunities to use the words in context. It is through contextual practice that students acquire the depth of knowledge of words that allows them to understand and use those words in meaningful ways. Research shows that ELLs know fewer words and less about their meaning than native English speakers, and they tend not to get the important contextual practice they need (Verhallen & Schoonen, 1993).

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Key vocabulary should be emphasized during reading across all content areas. Review and practice is an important instructional “habit” to develop because repeated exposure to vocabulary increases retention. In selecting key vocabulary, there ought to be a focus on teaching words that students aren’t likely to encounter through conversational experiences as well as those words they will encounter frequently in texts (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005).

Opportunities for interaction. Whole-group, teacher-led instruction is the most common way of teaching at the secondary level. Language development is an active process, however, and ELLs benefit from frequent opportunities for interaction with the teacher and among students (Echevarria, 1995; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Whole-group instruction is an effective way to introduce new material and teach new skills and concepts. However, interaction is stilled when whole-group instruction is used exclusively. In our work, we have observed that teams, partners, and groups facilitate interaction: within smaller groups, students can engage in genuine dialogue with peers and the teacher.

Conclusion

ELLs constitute a population whose growing numbers require that educators take a serious look at their instructional programs. To have effective instructional programs, educators must be prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary for meeting these students’ unique needs. Focused, sustained professional development around practices known to be effective will create opportunities for these deserving students to experience success in school and beyond. PL

References


