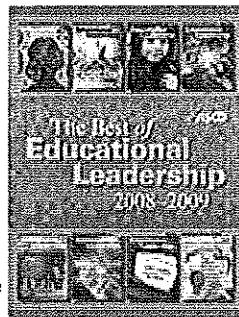


Best Practices for Adolescent ELLs

Judith Rance-Roney

We need to move beyond the labels and implement proven practices that recognize students' diverse needs and strengths.



Heck. As specialists in English language learning, we don't even agree on what to call ourselves, our students, or our programs. ELLs, ELs, LEP, ESL, ELD, ESOL, bilingual. With chaos in terminology, our communication with content-area teachers, school administrators, and student services staff is often garbled and filled with off-putting labels.

Even veteran ELL (English language learner) specialists are confused. In a yearly Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages conference ritual, my friend, a school administrator and ELL teacher from California, and I, a teacher educator from New York, sit down over a cup of coffee in what we have begun to call our "bicoastal 'What do you call it this year?' chat." We've learned to tread lightly through the terminology, more than once having our proverbial hands slapped for using a term deemed not politically correct in a particular context.

This confusion only complicates the challenges of schools striving to educate large and increasing populations of language-minority students. And one of the most complex challenges is how to meet the needs of adolescent English language learners.

A Challenging Population

Whether adolescent English language learners are citizens, residents, or undocumented individuals, *Plyler v. Doe* ensures their right to an education if they meet the age limits determined in state education codes. However, in many high schools across the United States, 16- to 20-year-old immigrants who seek to attend school are discouraged from enrolling and referred to adult literacy programs offering far fewer hours of schooling.

The lack of enthusiasm for serving these students is unfortunate, but understandable. Public schools may feel they have little to gain and much to lose by enrolling older adolescents who have little or no English. No Child Left Behind demands that after one year of enrollment, ELLs must take statewide assessments, and the results must be integrated into the school's accountability measures. Enrolling large numbers of adolescent ELLs can put the school at risk of failing to make adequate yearly progress.

In these times of increasingly meager resources in which schools are paring down to essential programs and making contingency plans to deal with statewide budget cuts and federal program funding reductions, adolescent ELLs are often viewed as an unwelcome presence in schools, a drain on the limited resources available. Increasing the challenge is the reality that many immigrant adolescents enter secondary schools with a triple whammy—little or no English, interrupted or limited formal schooling, and limited literacy in any language.

Who Are Adolescent ELLs?

There is no more diverse learning cohort than that grouped under the term *adolescent English language learner*. Although many of these students are newcomers (immigrants who arrived within the past five years), others have always called the United States home. We know, for example, that 57 percent of adolescent learners classified as limited English proficient were born within U.S. borders and thus are second- or third-generation residents (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). These students have often achieved oral proficiency but lag behind in their ability to use English for literacy and content learning for reasons

that may be only partly related to second-language status—for example, mobility and switching between language programs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

The particular life circumstances of any adolescent ELL will predict the individual needs that his or her school must address. Immigration status, quality of education background, native language, cultural distance from U.S. culture, expectation of remaining in the United States or reentering the country of origin, and economic resources are just a few of the variables (Lucas, 1997).

Indeed, the adolescent population of English learners is marked by its heterogeneity. The fact that the students share the label of limited English proficient (LEP) is vastly overshadowed by the variety of challenges and personal resources that they bring to schools.

Some immigrant students arrive in the United States with fully developed academic literacy in their native language and a strong record of academic achievement in their home countries. Filip, for example, entered U.S. schools in 9th grade after having attended a high-level academic school in the Czech Republic. Within two years, he had gained a command of academic English and was performing above grade level.

Contrast Filip with Ben, who emigrated from the Sudan at age 16 after experiencing the trauma of civil unrest and a severe interruption in formal schooling, which resulted in a limited foundation in literacy in any language. Rosaria, unlike either Filip or Ben, is a U.S.-born English language learner. Although her home language is Spanish, at 17, her social language outside the home is English. However, her writing exhibits many of the linguistic differences of an immigrant English learner, and she reads at the 5th grade level.

The common label *adolescent English language learner*, applied to all three of these students, may tempt us to assume that their academic needs are essentially the same. In reality, there is a patchwork quilt of English language learner profiles—a quilt rich with diverse life experiences, but loosely woven with common learning needs.

Promising Principles and Practices

It's time to move beyond the labels that confound and restrict the ways schools serve adolescent English language learners and to move these students out of the periphery of school reform efforts.

Adolescent ELLs benefit most from reforms that improve learning for all students, such as curriculum improvement, professional development, and school reorganization (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Such reforms must also take into account the particular context of each school—its demographic profile, existing program models, community culture, and so on. With this caveat in mind, a number of principles and practices support improved achievement for adolescent ELLs as well as for their native-English-speaking peers.

Schoolwide, Team-Based Support

Key question: Do educators in your school assume shared responsibility for the achievement of English language learners?

In many schools, the ELL specialist or ESL (English as a second language) teacher goes it alone. The ELL classroom is viewed as the one-stop shop for all the needs of English language learners—testing, translating, counseling, editing college applications, and even health care. Mainstream school personnel may abdicate responsibility for the needs of ELLs because they believe that the specialist understands these students better.

We need to give ELLs access to the full resources of the school. One way to accomplish this is by creating cross-disciplinary schoolwide teams that may include the ELL specialist, content-area teachers who teach English language learners, counselors who specialize in the needs of ELLs, key school administrators, and other staff. Such teams should have a common planning period and should meet regularly to align curriculum; plan integrated, cross-content projects; address student concerns; and monitor student progress. School support staff (the librarian, social worker, technology leader, and so on) should attend

some meetings to ensure that ELLs have access to an array of learning resources and services.

A Dual Curriculum

Key question: Does your school provide a curriculum that promotes the language development of English language learners as well as their general academic needs?

Marzano (2003) identifies one of the key factors in fostering school achievement as "a guaranteed and viable curriculum" (p. 22). For English language learners, a viable curriculum must include a detailed developmental sequence for learning the English language in social and academic contexts; this is in contrast to a language arts curriculum for native speakers, which primarily seeks to add academic discourse to the native language that a student brings to school. However, in many states, the standards that guide the school or district curriculum for ELLs may simply copy the English language arts standards designed for native English speakers, with little careful attention to second-language development. A viable curriculum also must address the additional time it will take for these students to concurrently master academic literacy and content.

To create a language-development curriculum, a school district should consult a team of educators, including classroom ELL teachers, university linguistics specialists, ELL coaches, and English language arts and content-area teachers. Such a curriculum should address the full range of English language competencies (grammatical and structural, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, discursive, and semantic) while focusing on language for social integration and on language for academic achievement.

The language curriculum should include not only instruction in the specialized language of each academic subject area (for example, in math, *hypotenuse*, *angle*, and so on.), but also academic cohesion words and phrases (such as *thus*, *therefore*, *as a result of*) and specialized academic process words (such as *explicate*, *enumerate*, *define*). Finally, these students should have "safe-space" opportunities not just to read and write this language, but to practice the spoken language of academic conversations so they can participate confidently in teacher-to-student interactions and in collaborative learning groups.

Global Community Classrooms

Key question: Does your district integrate English language learners who are recent immigrants with the general school population, segregate them in self-contained classrooms or schools, or find a middle ground?

Recent immigrants may face even more challenges than other English language learners as they attempt to adjust to a new country and culture. One approach to easing that adjustment is the newcomer school, which may be a school within a school (Olsen, 1997) or, like New York City's award-winning International High School, a stand-alone school enrolling only recent immigrants. These schools provide immigrant students with intensive English-language instruction, content-area support in their native languages, and culturally responsive student and social services.

However, school districts may not have sufficient numbers of immigrants or enough community support to maintain this model. And some researchers express concern about extended linguistic segregation because of the lack of interaction with U.S.-born peers, potentially lower standards for academic achievement and opportunity, and lack of access to social networks that will serve these learners in the future (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003).

A promising classroom structure sometimes called the *ELL cluster model* has emerged in some schools to integrate some of the benefits of newcomer programs while avoiding linguistic segregation from native-English-speaking peers (Rance-Roney, 2008). A special cohort of content-area teachers is trained in methods for teaching the English language and in theories of second-language acquisition. Within these globally focused classrooms, one-quarter to one-third of the students are English language learners and the remaining students are native English speakers. This classroom model uses elements of the sheltered instruction approach for ELLs, a class structure wherein content mastery and academic language skill are

developed concurrently. Although the class is conducted in English, classroom aides who speak the ELLs' native languages may assist. The teacher creates an environment that legitimizes the students' appropriate use of the native language to support the learning of academic content.

Native English speakers in cluster classrooms benefit from the diverse perspectives their multilingual students bring to class discussion. In addition, the use of such instructional techniques as increased use of visuals, deeper development of background information, and more activities that increase student-to-student interaction supports learning for every student. A crucial component of the cluster model is building intentional communities to foster interaction and respect among cultures. Further research is needed on the ELL cluster model, but at the very least, in these classrooms their teachers and classmates view ELLs as resources, not as liabilities.

Extended Time to Learn

Key question: Has your school explored ways to use all available time in English language learners' school day for effective instruction—including the idea of implementing flexible student pathways?

In *Double the Work*, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) recommend adopting flexible student pathways that may entail an extended school year or day schedule, night and weekend classes, or simply a plan that enables late-entry adolescent ELLs to stay in high school for more than the expected four years. The authors describe several alternative high school programs, including the J. E. B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. This school's individualized education plans for late-entry ELLs may include summer sessions, after-school tutoring, block scheduling, and literacy intervention classes. A partnership with the local community college also enables students to begin their college programs while they finish an extended high school schedule.

Even schools that are unable to implement alternative pathways need to maximize adolescent ELLs' learning opportunities. For example, teachers of state-mandated ESL or ESOL courses should integrate subject-area content with language development and academic learning strategies. And although well-meaning school personnel might attempt to make the school day easier for these students by scheduling study halls and life-enrichment electives, such courses should be kept to a minimum. Adolescent ELLs have much to learn and little time to learn it.

Unfortunately, schools frequently assign even ELLs with high academic ability to remedial courses that will slow their progress toward graduation. Rumberger and Gándara (2004) describe

instances where secondary English learners, even those with college preparatory coursework in their countries of origin, were assigned to nonacademic and remedial courses, and shortened days in their high schools. (p. 2,046)

Schools should coach guidance counselors, assistant principals, and other staff who do student scheduling to ignore the label of limited English proficient, and instead to examine each individual's academic history and potential.

Individual Progress Records

Key question: Does your school maintain (and make easily available to teachers and other key personnel) records of individual English language learners' linguistic and academic history and ongoing progress?

What amazes me when I speak with many content-area teachers is that they often remain unaware until November or December of the existence of English language learners among the 120–150 students they meet each day. Why hasn't the ELL teacher shared information about these students? As Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) write,

Mainstream teachers need to learn about the language and academic backgrounds of the ELLs in their classes, because without this knowledge, teachers cannot anticipate the aspects of learning that are likely to be too difficult for their ELLs to

handle without instructional supports. (p. 366)

As part of the intake process, the school should always take an academic history that provides a year-by-year accounting of school experience. In a comprehensive interview (with a translator), the school should collect details of language background, family support, and personal goals and maintain these in an individual folder for each ELL.

To plan the optimum class schedule and to assess how easily the student is likely to master both English and content material, schools must consider this academic history. Filip, for example, should have a class schedule that reflects his strong academic background, which may be hidden by his current English limitations. Ben, on the other hand, will need a web of support services and a plan for extended years of school enrollment to give him the best chance of graduation. Rosaria, who is native-like in spoken English, may require intensive academic intervention support services concurrent with her academic program, with individual attention from a specialist cross-trained in ELL methods and literacy. Too often, schools label these students by their lack of English and not by their actual individual learning needs.

A second component of the student folder is an English language learning record. As students enter school, they bring varying levels of general English proficiency, but—even more challenging—they bring a variety of specific language skills. One high school student may sound like a native speaker but exhibit significant errors in written work; another student may write with relative accuracy and ease but have difficulty with oral expression. Such variations must guide the students' individual learning plan.

Teachers of ELLs should conduct ongoing classroom-based assessment (monthly or bimonthly) of each learner's progress toward English mastery and record the results in a learning record that follows the student from teacher to teacher and school to school. Some of the techniques of literacy assessment—such as running records, anecdotal evidence, competency checklists, and alternative assessment—are being adapted successfully for this population.

ELLs are more transient on average than native speakers. As families settle in the area, they may try out different housing options or move to build closer family connections. School district offices should monitor the flow of students within and across district borders and identify other schools and districts that may share the same ELL population. Working together to build both a coherent shared curriculum and parallel learning records will mean more cohesive services for adolescent ELLs.

Moving Beyond the Labels

I still dream of a *kumbaya* moment when ELL teachers from the east and the west and everywhere in between will gather together to agree on the terms that define our field, our learners, and our programs. If we look beyond the labels, however, there is surprising agreement in what constitutes best practice for adolescent English language learners. It is up to school leaders to implement the school reforms that work and to think outside the traditional boxes that have restricted the achievement of these students.

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