

Improving Adequate Yearly Progress for English Language Learners

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Introduction

A key feature of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is ensuring adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all students. Schools and districts must meet state-determined AYP criteria for academic progress for all students as well as subgroups of students by ethnicity, English proficiency, income level, and special education. This places a new focus and accountability on the levels of achievement for English language learners (ELLs).

NCLB outlines the process that individual states must follow to develop systems that measure the progress of all students. This process includes: setting challenging academic standards, developing annual state-level assessments that address the states' learning standards, setting an initial starting point, specifying successive targets for AYP, and providing increased support to schools that consistently do not meet AYP (Haycock & Wiener, 2003).

District and school improvement plans are developed to both monitor and ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and receive the education they deserve. This presents both opportunities and challenges for schools with large subgroup populations, especially ELLs.

Variance in English Language Learners

ELLs represent a growing subgroup population in schools across the United States. Total enrollment of elementary and secondary students in the United States has grown by nearly 12 percent in the past decade. At the same time, the growth of ELL students has grown by more than 95 percent (Padolsky, 2002). States across the country are seeing rapidly growing numbers of ELL students entering their schools.

While ELL students are classified as a single subgroup, there are differing characteristics of students within this group. This poses specific instructional issues and challenges with regard to AYP. Mercuri, Freeman, & Freeman (2002) identify some of the differing characteristics by classifying ELLs in three groups: newly arrived with adequate schooling, newly arrived with limited formal schooling, and long-term English learners. Each group possesses specific characteristics and instructional issues as noted in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics and Instructional Issues of ELL Subgroups.

Group	Newly Arrived With Adequate Schooling	Newly Arrived With Limited Formal Schooling	Long-Term English Learner
Years in U.S. Schools	Less than 5	Less than 5	7 or more
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous schooling in native country • Native school system parallels U.S. schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schooling in native country may be limited or interrupted • Lacks a sense of school culture and routines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have attended multiple schools • Experienced multiple curricula and methods of English-language instruction
Instructional Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes steady academic progress • May still have difficulty on standardized tests in English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited literacy and math development, which may lead to poor academic achievement in U.S. schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have unrealistic perspective on demands of school • Achieves conversational fluency, but not academic fluency needed for success in school

While it can be argued that variance exists within any subgroup of learners, there are specific issues related to AYP and ELL students that warrant attention. Jamal Abedi (2004) details several assessment issues of particular interest related to this group of students. First, the classification criteria for ELL students can differ within states and across districts. These inconsistencies in classification may compromise the accuracy of AYP for ELL students.

ELL populations also vary in size across districts and states. Schools with small numbers of ELL students are not required to report AYP due to the lack of valid or reliable data when working with small populations of students. However, federal policies generated from AYP progress will impact all states. When it comes to disaggregating on the basis of ELL students, decisions may well be based on data only from states with large numbers of ELL students.

Furthermore, there is constant variance in the ELL subgroup populations since students continuously transition out of ELL programs as they achieve English-language proficiency. This creates a subgroup that is continually made up of low-performing students. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) does offer states an option that allows ELL students who have attained English proficiency and exited an ELL program to continue to be counted for up to two years in the ELL subgroup. This option provides states with greater flexibility for showing academic growth of ELL subgroups because students with higher levels of language proficiency and potentially higher scores would remain in the ELL-subgroup count.

Key Characteristics of Effective Programs

Schools and districts with large ELL populations face the challenge of providing ELL students with opportunities to maximize their learning. Each of the issues discussed in the previous section present factors, not excuses. These factors become considerations as districts plan effective programs for all students, including ELLs. Research on effective programs reveals key quality characteristics.

Characteristics of three specific, research-based frameworks (Mercuri, Freeman, & Freeman, 2002; Dalton, 1998; & García & Beltrán, 2003) reveal some common features. Challenging instruction, collaboration, and recognition and validation of students’ home and life experiences are identified across all three frameworks for all ELL students—from newly arrived to long-term learners. The features of the three frameworks cited are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Features of Effective ELL Program Frameworks.

Framework	Mercuri, Freeman, & Freeman	Dalton	García & Beltrán
Challenging Instruction	Engage students in challenging, theme-based curriculum to develop academic concepts.	Design instruction that will teach complex thinking and challenge students to develop cognitive complexity.	Support the academic success of English learners with a solid curriculum framework.
Collaboration	Organize collaborative activities, and scaffold instruction to build students’ academic English proficiency.	Provide teachers and students with opportunities to work in instructional activities through teacher-student conversations and goal-directed, small-group conversations.	Ensure that knowledgeable professionals design and execute instructional opportunities.
Recognition and Validation of Students’ Experiences	Draw on students’ backgrounds—their experiences, cultures, and languages—to create confident students who value school and value themselves as learners.	Use students’ funds of knowledge and skills to connect the curriculum to students’ lives and experiences in their homes, communities, and schools.	Develop a network of support to reinforce effective practices within the school, the family, and the community.

Teacher efficacy, within a culturally responsive classroom, is an underlying feature inherent across these frameworks. Teacher efficacy (Ashton, 1984) expands the concept of teacher expectations. Specific characteristics of an effective teacher include a teacher's personal belief that he or she can influence student learning. Teachers with high levels of efficacy also have a sense of personal accomplishment and see their work as meaningful and important. They accept personal responsibility for their teaching, holding themselves accountable for student performance, and they examine their instructional practices when student performance is less than expected. Teachers who possess high levels of efficacy, who use research-based instructional models and provide explicit strategy instruction, can make a difference with ELL students and close the achievement gaps.

Instructional Models

Two research-based models of instruction specifically designed to meet the needs of ELL students are the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) and the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). Both models address the integration of language instruction with content to provide more challenging and engaging instructional environments for ELLs.

CALLA Model

Based on cognitive theory and research, the CALLA model, which was developed by Anna Uhl Chamot and J. Michael O'Malley (1993), was designed to accelerate the transition of ELL students into the mainstream classroom by providing direct instruction in the learning strategies necessary for content area learning. The CALLA model provides a framework for lesson design that integrates language development, content area instruction, and explicit instruction in learning strategies.

Language development includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing in cognitively demanding lessons that are scaffolded to increase student learning of both language skills and content. The content area is derived from the grade-level expectations and curriculum in the mainstream classroom. Lessons are focused on the essential ideas taught in depth using higher-order thinking skills.

A critical component of the lesson is strategy instruction. Metacognitive strategies are selected for their use in learning specific lesson content as well as their transferability to other lessons. Students are explicitly told the name of the strategy, why using it will assist their learning, and how to use it within the lesson context and across other contexts. Teachers using CALLA provide models of effective strategy use, then give students opportunities to practice the strategy with teacher or peer support before the student is asked to use and apply the strategy independently.

SIOP Model

The SIOP model represents the results of more than 10 years of research by Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt, and Deborah J. Short (2004). SIOP provides teachers with an observation instrument that also serves as a tool for planning, implementing, and reflecting on lesson delivery. The SIOP model gives teachers a structure for how to teach what students need to learn in terms of both the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and the specific content students need to learn along with their grade-level English-speaking peers. The SIOP model consists of three major categories: Preparation, Instruction, and Review/Assessment. The Instruction category is further divided into with six features: Building Background, Comprehensible Input, Strategies, Interaction, Practice/Application, and Lesson Delivery. Preparation, the six features of Instruction, and Review/Assessment make up the eight components of the SIOP model.

SIOP addresses both content and language objectives. Key vocabulary, an essential component for building background knowledge for ELL students, is identified and linked to past learning. Concepts and content are clearly presented, with consideration of the language-proficiency levels of students. Frequent interactions—between ELL students and their teacher and between ELL students and their peers—are meaningful and focused on content. SIOP stresses student engagement during the lesson through hands-on materials and activities that utilize content and language knowledge. Ongoing assessment and specific feedback is given to students, enabling teachers to adjust instruction and ensure achievement of objectives.

Instructional Strategies and Tools for Learning

An instructional model can provide the necessary framework for effective instruction, but teachers also need a set of strategies, and accompanying tools, for learning that can be used across content areas to support the learning of ELL students. Many strategies that work well for struggling readers whose native language is English will also work well with students who are ELLs. Activating and building background knowledge, as well as explaining key concepts and vocabulary, are essential to support ELL students. Three simple but highly effective tools for learning are structured overviews, graphic organizers, and think-alouds. These tools incorporate instruction in both background knowledge and vocabulary development in order to make information more accessible and meaningful to students.

Structured Overviews

Structured overviews provide students with the “big picture” of what will be learned. ELL students benefit from both auditory and visual overviews. A handout that outlines the major ideas and shows the relationship of one idea to another can help students build or activate their background knowledge. Merely handing out an overview is not enough. Teachers must verbally present the information and explicitly show the relationships of the concepts that will be taught. These concepts are the ideas represented by the key vocabulary. Teachers can further scaffold instruction by meeting with ELL students to tell them how this information was organized and by giving them explicit instruction on key vocabulary terms before they are presented to the entire class.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers such as concept maps, timelines, and flow charts provide students with visual tools to organize, understand, and remember vocabulary concepts and key ideas. By teaching students how to use graphic organizers, students can record information while reading or listening. Teachers provide scaffolding for students as they begin the use of graphic organizers by filling in some of the information beforehand. As students become more proficient, the teacher can gradually remove the scaffold by filling in less and less information. Eventually, the student will be able to independently organize information. Graphic organizers also enable the student to study and review material by providing a concise, integrated summary of the content.

Think-Alouds

Think-alouds enable teachers to make their thinking public and model for students what secure readers do as they read. Less secure readers spend so much time figuring out what the words say that they have very little cognitive energy left to figure out what it all means. By reading aloud and modeling the thinking processes of secure readers, teachers can show students how to stop and monitor their understanding, apply specific strategies, and know when to ask for help.

Prior to starting a think-aloud, it is important for the teacher to establish a signal that lets the students know when the teacher is thinking versus when the teacher is reading. This is especially important if the students don't have the text to follow along. The teacher may simply look up or put a finger to his or her head to indicate, "Now, I'm thinking." The teacher begins a think-aloud by reading and then stopping at various points to illustrate how he or she is using one of the metacognitive strategies of applying background knowledge, visualizing, clarifying, or questioning what has been read. Think-alouds provide students with a model of how to monitor their reading as a way to increase their comprehension.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Teaching ELL students a few strategies, which can be used flexibly in a variety of contexts, helps to level the playing field for these students as they are integrated into mainstream classrooms. As the subgroup of ELL students continues to increase at a higher proportional rate than the population of mainstream students, teachers will need to utilize effective strategies grounded in research-based instructional models within a framework that supports learning for all students. In many schools and district across the country, this will call for a revision of practice that can move students beyond AYP and close the achievement gaps.

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