

# Structured Support for English Learners

by Dr. Deborah J. Short

**FOR EDUCATORS OF STUDENTS** who are English learners (ELs), the goal is twofold: to accelerate their development of academic English and to strengthen their content knowledge. Research has shown that ELs both improve their academic English skills and learn more of the content of school subjects through this integrated instructional approach (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). When EL students participate in a program of systematic instruction and assessment that provides them with access to solid, research-based curricula and that also advances their academic language and literacy skills, they can succeed in school and beyond.

## Understanding English Learners in Middle School

Most English learners in middle school are already on the path to academic literacy. They are not stalled; rather, they are making steady progress.

Second-language acquisition, however, takes time—and requires understanding of what EL students bring to our classrooms.

Some English learners arrive in the United States without literacy in their native language. Yet often they are placed in the classrooms of teachers who lack training in how to teach basic literacy skills to adolescents (Rueda & García, 2001). These newcomers need a developmental program of language and literacy with direct instruction in vocabulary, grammar and the fundamentals of reading and writing.

Other ELs have grown up in the U.S., but for reasons such as family mobility, sporadic school attendance, or limited access to ELD, 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 strong native-language literacy skills. These students have a strong foundation that can facilitate their

academic English growth as their prior knowledge and aspects of their literacy abilities can transfer from the native language to the new one.

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 (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Kamil, 2003), and that the development of proficiency in academic English is a complex process for adolescent ELs. 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,

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syntax, phonology, pragmatics, and discourse levels of the language as they are applied in school. (Bailey, 2007; Dutro & Moran, 2003; 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 tend to engage more with text that they have chosen themselves, and they will read material above their reading 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 they read.

Self-perceptions as a strong vs. weak reader and personal goals also influence motivation. Out-of-school experiences and literacies also play an important role. 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. On the other hand, positive out-of-school interactions with English literacy (through text messaging, the Internet, music, work) may strengthen their engagement with literacy practices in the classroom. The opportunity to participate in collaborative literacy activities with their classmates often heightens motivation as well.

## Promoting English Literacy Development: What Research Tells Us

A number of recent 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; Slavin & Cheung, 2003). These reports provide a great deal of valuable information about adolescent ELs and about the curricular content and instructional practices that work best to promote their academic language and literacy skills. The following are among the reports’ key findings:

**1. Transfer of Skills** Certain native-language skills transfer to English literacy, including phonemic awareness, comprehension and language-learning strategies, and native- and second-language oral knowledge. If students have opportunities to learn and maintain literacy in their native language, they may more quickly acquire English. Content that students learn through their native language is *learned*

*knowledge*. They may require assistance to articulate this knowledge in English, but they do not have to relearn it. The process of transfer 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 they have enough proficiency (e.g., vocabulary, sense of sentence structure, etc.) to engage with text, students who have learned reading 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.

**3. Academic English** Teaching the five essential 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 and academic discourse patterns as well. These are the vocabulary and language structures that make up academic English—the language used in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Academic English allows students to participate in classroom talk, such as supporting a historical perspective or providing evidence for a scientific claim.

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

**4. Instructional Accommodations** High-quality instruction for EL students is similar to high-quality instruction for native English-speaking students. However, beginning- and intermediate-level ELs need instructional accommodations and support. The National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006) found that the impact of instructional interventions is weaker for English learners than it is for English speakers. This suggests that for ELs, interventions must include added supports or accommodations (Goldenberg, 2006).

## 5. Enhanced Explicit Vocabulary Development

English learners need enhanced, direct vocabulary development. Direct teaching of specific words can facilitate vocabulary growth and lead to increased reading comprehension for native English speakers (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and 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 morphemic (word part) analysis.

For some ELs, these strategies should include ways for them to identify and use native-language cognates to figure out English words. Helping ELs develop knowledge of words, word parts, 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 Curriculum for ELs

Comprehensive literacy instruction programs for English learners must incorporate the following elements:

- lesson objectives that are based on state content and language standards
- explicit attention to academic, cross-curricular vocabulary and subject-specific terminology
- strategic, developmental reading instruction tied to a wide range of expository and narrative texts
- explicit writing instruction
- listening and speaking/discourse instruction
- grammar instruction
- teaching practices that both tap students' prior knowledge and build background for learning about new topics
- explicit instruction in learning strategies
- instruction in common content area tasks
- comprehension checks and opportunities for review

In effective programs, we see teachers using specific techniques, such as those in the SIOP Model for sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008), to make

the presentation of new content comprehensible for English learners. For example:

- Teachers make the standards-based, lesson objectives explicit to the students, utilizing realia, pictures, and video clips to help students visualize the content.
- Before moving into a reading or a writing activity, teachers activate students' prior knowledge and link to past learning, tapping students' current abilities in their native language. They preteach vocabulary, and build background appropriate to the content and task at hand.
- Knowing that typical lecture practices are not effective with ELs, teachers organize the presentation of information into chunks suited to students' proficiency levels, offer demonstrations, promote student-student interaction, teach note-taking skills with specific organizers, and include time for reflection.
- To build competence and the ability to work independently, any new subject matter task or classroom routine is scaffolded for students by using sentence and paragraph frames graduated to students' proficiency levels. Thus, teachers lead students, even those at differing levels of proficiency, to higher levels of understanding and independent practice.
- 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. Language skills taught in one lesson are reinforced in later ones.
- To ensure that learning is taking place and students are making expected progress, teachers check ELs' comprehension frequently during instruction. They also use multiple measures to monitor progress on a more formal basis, using assessments that accommodate the students' developing language skills and lead to timely reteaching.

## Applying the Research: *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides all of these elements of successful instruction for ELs.

The program uses state standards for language, literacy, and content as the foundation for the lesson objectives. At Levels C–E, the standards also inform the guiding questions that address topical issues like *What happens when cultures cross paths?* and *What makes the environment so valuable?* These guiding questions engage and motivate

students to read and find answers. Moreover, students share ideas about the questions over the course of three major selections in each unit, which offers them opportunities to build language in context over time and to respond more thoughtfully as they gain new perspectives, information, and, in some cases, data.

Lesson plans are built around techniques that are appropriate for English learners. For example, reading lessons begin with building background using pictures and videos from the National Geographic Digital Library.

To promote growth in vocabulary, the program teaches both key content-related words from the reading selections and important academic words and concepts, such as *debate*, *sequence*, and *organize*, that students can apply across content areas. It also includes a wide range of vocabulary-building activities for ELs, giving them multiple opportunities to practice new words in various contexts. In addition, instructional routines for daily vocabulary practice help students use independent word-learning strategies.

Academic Language Frames are used to further support ELs' development of language. These frames provide structure for using language to carry out academic tasks. Because the frames are graduated in language complexity, they help students of all proficiencies to participate fully in class discussions and activities.

Each level includes daily lessons in English grammar and sentence structure so that students receive systematic, comprehensive language instruction. See PD pages 52–55 for the full description of these lessons.

With each selection, the program targets a specific language function, such as Ask for and Give Information or Describe. Students hear multiple language models to help them see the language function in action and participate in songs, chants and other audio lessons to try out the language function in a risk-free way. In the selection lessons, students use this language function again and again.

Instructional strategies are specifically designed for English learners. For example, lessons promote interaction and the use of oral language, often in cooperative learning activities. The lessons offer Multi-Level Strategies to give students at different levels of language proficiency access to the text or to support their participation in the task at hand.

## Conclusion

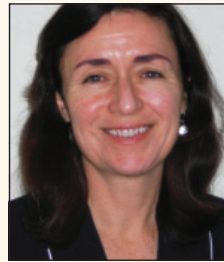
Effective instruction for English learners requires both high expectations and specialized strategies to ensure success. The standards base of *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* along with its structured supports, Multi-Level Strategies, and other instructional techniques designed especially for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

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