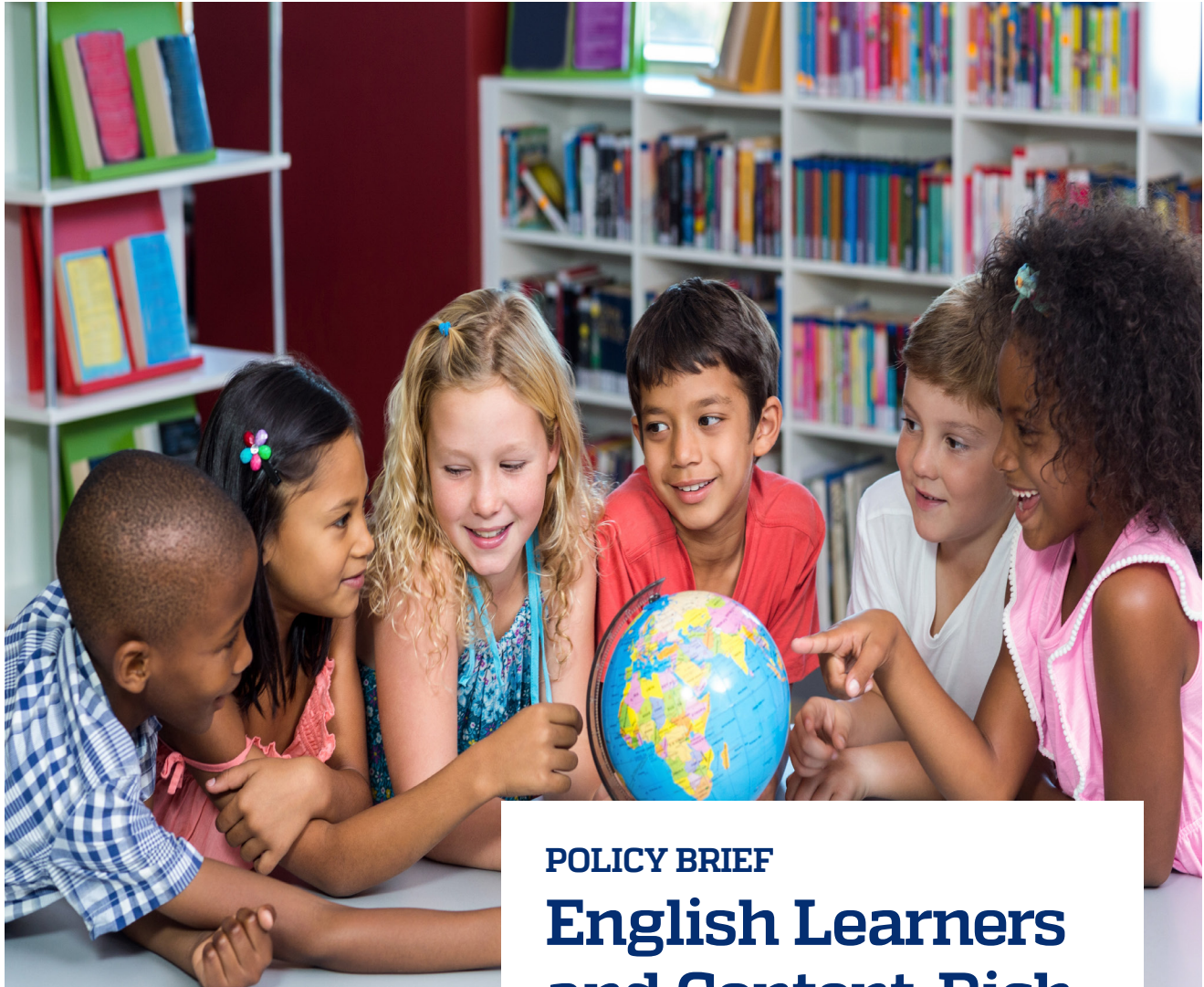




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POLICY BRIEF

# English Learners and Content-Rich Curricula

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In the words of eminent English Learner expert, Dr. Lily Wong Fillmore, English Learner (EL) instruction is traditionally characterized by:

“...materials that are so greatly simplified that they provide virtually no exposure to the forms and structures of the language they should be learning...[with] a lot of attention and energy focused on turning ELs into English speakers and not nearly enough on educating them...What ELs...need are authentic and age-appropriate texts...with appropriate instructional support from teachers who know how to support language development.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Fillmore is joined by other EL experts who decry the fact that far too often, schools make learning English a bridge ELs must first cross before they are allowed to study fields of genuine interest to them in science, history, geography, etc. This is directly counter to the recommendation of EL researchers, who tell us that ELs learn language best when doing so in the service of learning content. Learning academic language can only really happen by engaging with, thinking about, discussing, and writing about topics and concepts that appear in authentic *disciplinary texts*. In short, learning English must be a partner to learning the practices, knowledge, and skills contained within content area classes.

The advent of the Common Core State Standards and other college and career readiness standards has heightened the challenges ELs face in school and reinforced the need to combine developing content knowledge with the acquisition of language and literacy skills. These standards demand that students possess ever-increasing command of the English language in order to acquire and perform the knowledge and skills the standards articulate. This includes requiring students to access complex texts through close reading; construct effective explanations or arguments to support their conclusions; identify speakers’ key points and points of view; elaborate on ideas from peer discussions; construct and test a range of hypotheses; and strategically choose and efficiently implement procedures to solve problems, to name just a few. ELs, therefore face the dual challenges of learning enough of a second language—English—so they can successfully participate in academic classes while they work to gain the knowledge and skills they need to be prepared for college and careers through that second language.

## Three Important Research-Based Principles for Planning and Delivering Excellent Instruction for ELs.

Principles of effective instruction for all students are critical for effective instruction of ELs, as well. In addition, however, ELs require supplementary supports, if instruction is to be meaningful and productive. They also need ample opportunity to develop real proficiency in English.

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<sup>1</sup> Lily Wong Fillmore, “Common Core Standards: Can English Learners Meet Them?” (CCSSO Fall Gathering, Washington, D.C., September 27, 2010), <http://programs.ccsso.org/projects/ELLCONF/Presentations/Lily%20wong%20fillmore.pdf>.

We recommend incorporating three important, research-based principles into the planning and delivery of excellent instruction for ELs:

- Principle 1: Adopt a Positive, Welcoming Mindset and Culture of Learning for ELs.
- Principle 2: Integrate Oral and Written Language Instruction into Rigorous Content-Area Teaching for ELs.
- Principle 3: Create and Sustain Conditions for the Productive Development of Teachers of ELs.

The elements contained within each principle are based largely on Understanding Language Project’s *Six Key Principles for ELL Instruction*<sup>2</sup> and the New York State’s *Blueprint for English Language Learner Success*,<sup>3</sup> which we suggest be adapted to meet each state’s or district’s specific needs.

## Principle 1: Adopt a Positive, Welcoming Mindset and Culture of Learning for ELs.

**Advance bilingualism and bi-literacy as assets to learning.** Possessing competence in both a home language and English is a strength and should be explicitly recognized as such. There is an inherent advantage to knowing and being literate in two languages—especially in the global economy.

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- Adesope, O.O., Lavin, T, Thompson, T., & Ungerleider, C. (2010). A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Cognitive Correlates of Bilingualism.
- Bialystok, E (2001), *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
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- Fillmore, L.W. (2010). *Common Core Standards: Can English learners meet them?* (Washington, D.C., CCSSO, September 27-28).
- Saiz, A. & Zoido, E. (2005). “Listening to What the World Says: Bilingualism and Earnings in the United States,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87, no. 3: 523–538.

**Capitalize on EL’s home language(s), cultural assets, and prior knowledge.** Home language(s) and culture(s) are instructional assets that can link prior knowledge to new knowledge and be

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<sup>2</sup>Understanding Language, “Six Key Principles for ELL Instruction,” Stanford Graduate School of Education, January 11, 2013, <http://ell.stanford.edu/content/six-key-principles-ell-instruction>.

<sup>3</sup>New York State Education Department, “Blueprint for English Language Learner Success” (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, April 2014), <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/bilingual-ed/nysblueprintforell-success.2016.pdf>.

used to promote ELs' academic development. These early language and literacy knowledge and skills can boost students' acquisition of English and learning more broadly in several ways:

- ELs who are literate in a first language that shares cognates with English can apply that knowledge to second language acquisition.
- ELs often have a heightened awareness of grammatical functions and effects, because they are using two or more languages.
- ELs can bring conceptual knowledge they developed in their first language to their disciplinary studies.

### References

- Bunch, G., Kibler, A., & Pimentel, S. (2012, January 13-14). Realizing opportunities for English Learners in the Common Core English Language Arts and disciplinary literacy standards. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- Moschkovich, J. (2012, January 13-14). Mathematics, the Common Core, and language: Recommendations for mathematics instruction for ELs aligned with the Common Core. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- Trueba, H. T., Moll, L. C., Diaz, S., & Diaz, R. (1984). Final report: Improving the functional writing of bilingual secondary students. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED240862). Retrieved April 1, 2011, from EBSCO Host ERIC database.

## Principle 2: Integrate Oral and Written Language Instruction into Rigorous Content-Area Teaching for ELs.

**Deliver academically rigorous, grade-level instruction to ELs.** ELs need to engage in grade-level instructional opportunities so that they have regular practice with negotiating meaning from complex texts, describing their reasoning, sharing their explanations, justifying their conclusions, and arguing from evidence (without manifesting native-like control of English).

### References:

- Council of Chief State School Officers. (2012). Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. Washington, DC: CCSSO.
- Hakuta, K., Santos, M., & Fang, Z. (2013). Challenges and Opportunities for Language Learning in the Context of the CCSS and the NGSS. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56: 451-454.
- van Lier, L., & Walquí, A. (2012, January 13-14). Language and the Common Core State Standards. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- Walquí, A., & Heritage, M. (2012, January 13-14). Instruction for diverse groups of English Language Learners. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

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**Provide ELs with instruction in core disciplines that simultaneously build background knowledge, conceptual understanding, and language competence.** Language is more than structures and functions; it is an essential tool for connecting disparate pieces of knowledge, inseparable from learning content. Therefore, preparing ELs must become a shared responsibility of language specialists with content teachers, and learning opportunities must be designed to integrate literacy and language with the practices of each discipline. ELs must learn to construct meaning from complex texts, understand academic talk, take part in academic discussions, and express themselves in writing across a variety of disciplinary contexts.

#### References:

- Council of Chief State School Officers. (2012). Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. Washington, DC: CCSSO.
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- Institute of Education Sciences. (April 2014). Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=19>
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**Provide ELs with deliberate scaffolding techniques and routines that are consistent with the research and offer multiple means of action, expression, and engagement.** Targeted language supports need to be delivered to ELs that supplement and do not supplant core instruction in the disciplines. Scaffolds should be designed to make content comprehensible and foster student independence. Techniques include strategically:

- Providing ELs with regular opportunities to negotiate meaning from grade-level complex texts, share their analyses, and argue from evidence by integrating into instruction,

- features that support ELs to make the content comprehensible;
- Providing daily opportunities for ELs to talk about content, anchored around topics present in the texts they are reading, to build their confidence and practice newly acquired skills;
- Engaging in intense vocabulary instruction before, during, and after reading over the course of several lessons;
- Engaging ELs in instructional conversations in which their attention is drawn to words, phrases, and clauses in texts they are working with, and;
- Providing regular, structured writing opportunities anchored in content to extend and solidify EL learning and knowledge.

**\*See a more detailed listing of research-based scaffolds and supports in the next section: Summary of Supports and Scaffolds Consistent with the Research.**

#### References:

- August, D. & D. S. Fenner (2014). *Scaffolding Instruction for English Language Learners: A Resource Guide for English Language Arts*. Center for English Language Learners at American Institutes for Research. Washington, DC.
- Council of Chief State School Officers. (2012). *Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards*. Washington, DC: CCSSO.
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- Hakuta, K., Santos, M., & Fang, Z. (2013). Challenges and Opportunities for Language Learning in the Context of the CCSS and the NGSS. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56: 451-454.
- Institute of Education Sciences. (April 2014) *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School*. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=19>

## Principle 3: Create and Sustain Conditions for the Productive Development of Teachers of ELs.

**Make all teachers, teachers of ELs.** In order for teachers to create and sustain the right conditions for the productive development of ELs, teachers themselves must be developed so they are able to support ELs in their acquisition of content knowledge while they progress towards English proficiency. Content-area teachers need time and space to:

- Learn from their English Language Development (ELD)/English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher-experts about teaching the English language to ELs.
- Systematically collaborate with their ELD/ESL teacher-experts to design instruction, analyze student work, and develop rigorous lessons that align to the new standards.
- Commit to the systematic trial of evidence-based EL practices. Then regularly gather rigorous student performance data that allows for the iterative evaluation and improve-

- ment of EL programming.
- Repeat the above continuously and systematically, throughout and across school years.

#### References:

- Goldenberg, C. (2013). Unlocking the Research on English Learners: What We Know and Don't Yet Know—about Effective Instruction. *American Educator*, 37(2), 4-11.
- Santos, M., Darling-Hammond, L., Cheuk, T. (2012, January 13-14). Teacher Development Appropriate to Support ELLs. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- Valdez, G. C., Snow, C. E., & Lee, C. (2005). Enhancing the development of students' language(s). In L. Darling-Hammond, J. Bransford, P. LePage, K. Hammerness & H. Duffy (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 126-168). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Differentiate instruction for students at diverse levels of English proficiency.** ELs within a single classroom can be heterogeneous in terms of their English proficiency, literacy levels, and time in the U.S., so teachers should design instruction accordingly. This includes the timely, frequent assessment of ELs to measure their academic language competence and determine whether special education accommodations are warranted.

#### References:

- Abedi, J., & Linqunti, R. (2012, January 13-14). Issues and opportunities in strengthening large scale assessment systems for ELLs. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- August, D. & D. S. Fenner (2014). *Scaffolding Instruction for English Language Learners: A Resource Guide for English Language Arts*. Center for English Language Learners at American Institutes for Research. Washington, DC.
- Bunch, G., Kibler, A., & Pimentel, S. (2012, January 13-14). Realizing opportunities for English Learners in the Common Core English Language Arts and disciplinary literacy standards. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.
- Heritage, M. (2010). *Formative assessment and next-generation assessment systems: Are we losing an opportunity?* Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Heritage, M., Walqui, A., & Linqunti, R. (2013, May). *Formative assessment as contingent teaching and learning: Perspectives on assessment as and for language learning in the content areas*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California.
- Walquí, A. & Heritage, M. (2012, January 13-14). *Instruction for diverse groups of English Language Learners*. Paper presented at Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

## Summary of Scaffolds and Supports Consistent with the Research<sup>4</sup>

1. Provide ELs with regular opportunities to negotiate meaning from grade-level complex texts, share their analyses, and argue from evidence by integrating into instruction, features that support ELs to make the content comprehensible.
  - A. Select grade-level complex anchor texts that:
    - Are brief and engaging to students.
    - Feature a variety of academic vocabulary words for potential study.
    - Are connected to a given unit of study and build student knowledge on the topic.
    - Provide details and examples (that help students understand new concepts and vocabulary).
    - Contain ideas that lend themselves to students thinking, writing, and talking about the text from a variety of perspectives.
  - B. Engage students in reading auxiliary texts and resources (illustrations, photo graphs, video clips) on the topic tied to the anchor text to build the knowledge and vocabulary necessary for students to tackle grade-level complex text.
  - C. Engage in a read-aloud of the text, perform choral reading, and/or utilize recordings of the text, before having students work with the text alone or in groups. Read-alouds can also be used to reinforce understanding and support fluency at subsequent points in working with a text.
  - D. Ask students to answer questions about relevant sections of the anchor text to engage students with the text; clarify the wording of questions if necessary, without reducing their conceptual rigor.
  - E. Provide opportunities for ELs to reread the text with different purposes, foci, questions, and activities each time.
  - F. Provide graphic organizers (or other tools, such as in-text highlighting and annotating) to help students capture and reflect on new knowledge. Graphic organizers can support students in preparing for content-focused writing and discussion.
  - G. Provide necessary contextual information and leverage ELs' background knowledge without paraphrasing or "pre-empting" the text for students.
  - H. Build on and expand ELs' knowledge about how different kinds of texts are structured.
2. Provide daily opportunities for ELs to talk and listen to others talk about content, anchored around topics present in the texts they are reading, to build their confidence and knowledge, and practice newly acquired skills.

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<sup>4</sup>See [achievethecore.org/ELL-annotated-bibliography](http://achievethecore.org/ELL-annotated-bibliography) for more detail on the research base for each one of these supports and scaffolds.



- A. Structure student groups around meaningful collaborative tasks (e.g., have students cite evidence from the text to support the position they take) that allow ELs to use their full linguistic and cultural resources. This includes:
    - Allowing ELs to collaborate in their home languages to process content before participating in whole class discussions in English.
    - Allowing ELs to use English language that is still under development.
    - Scheduling time in which pairs of students at different English language proficiencies work together on academic tasks that practice and extend what has been taught.
    - Providing brief additional comprehension and vocabulary instruction connected to the content being covered in small groups of ELs (three to five students) who are struggling with language and literacy.
  - B. Ask ELs to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of extended discourse, rather than being asked to process every word literally.
  - C. Scaffold questions for discussions so that questioning sequences include a mix of factual and inferential questions and a mix of shorter and more extended responses.
  - D. Present directions and tasks orally and visually; repeat often; and ask students to rephrase.
3. Engage in intense academic vocabulary before, during, and after reading over the course of several lessons.
- A. Provide explicit instruction, using multiple modalities, on selected vocabulary words (5-8 for a given text) that are central to understanding the text.
  - B. Read the *text* aloud, then facilitate a discussion about specific words in the text.
  - C. Emphasize meanings of everyday words that are not necessarily part of the academic curriculum.
  - D. Explicitly clarify and reinforce definitions of words using examples, non-examples, synonyms, antonyms, and concrete representations.
  - E. Provide opportunities to practice using newly acquired vocabulary in the context of their discussions and writing:
    - Provide a range of engaging activities (e.g., crosswords, charades, sketching) to represent word meanings in texts they are reading.
    - Ask students to respond to questions where they have to show their understanding of subtle differences in usage and meaning.
  - F. Teach ELs strategies that help them determine word meanings on their own by focusing on:
    - Cognates;
    - Word parts (prefixes, affixes, roots);
    - Context clues;
    - Looking at a word as different part of speech (e.g. environment, environmental, environmentally);
  - G. Provide student-friendly dictionaries that will allow ELs to look up words essential to comprehending the texts they are reading (but which will not be explicitly taught within the whole class setting).

4. Engage ELs in instructional conversations in which their attention is drawn to words, phrases, and clauses in texts they are working with.
  - A. Highlight “juicy” sentences that feature grade-appropriate complex structures, vocabulary, and language features. Guide students to break apart these sentences, analyze different elements, and determine meaning:
    - Create questions that help to build ELs’ understanding of syntax and how it can be used to determine word meanings.
    - Focus on pronouns and their use.
5. Provide regular, structured writing opportunities anchored in content to build, extend, and solidify EL learning and knowledge:
  - A. Allow ELs to use their home languages as they prepare for writing—including researching, discussing, reading, and writing on the topic in their home language prior to writing in English.
  - B. Provide ELs with meaningful exposure to writing exemplars/mentor texts that highlight specific elements of a well-structured response.
  - C. Provide language-based supports (e.g., linking phrases, sentence frames, word banks) to facilitate students’ entry into, and continued development of, writing. (Note: These should not be mandated “fill in the blanks” exercises.)
  - D. Provide positive, substantive feedback that is specific, constructive, and narrowly tied to the lesson’s or week’s instructional objective (i.e., do not assess, spelling, grammar, accuracy of understanding all in one piece of writing—that is an overwhelming amount of feedback).
  - E. Focus explicit lessons on meaning-critical grammatical structures and text structure (e.g., transitions and linking phrases)
  - F. Use a set of clear, concrete instructional routines that support ELs as they generate and organize their ideas for writing and research (e.g., discussion to notes to graphic organizers to paragraphs, and finally to independent writing and revision of compositions).
  - G. Attend to the fact that some writing skills are affected by ELs’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds that may not align with those in the standards.

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