

Research Review:  
What Research Says  
About Preparing English Language Learners  
for Academic Success  
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**Research Review:**

**What Research Says About Preparing English Language Learners for Academic Success**

Improving academic success among English language learners (ELLs) is a challenge faced by many schools and districts. The task is complicated by several factors, including the demographics of the ELL population, which has more than doubled since 1990, and the fact that **the ELL label masks a great deal of diversity** (NCELA, 2007). For example, Spanish is the first language for 79 percent of ELLs, and the Asian languages are a distant second, but other ELLs may speak any one of more than 400 languages (NCELA, 2002). In addition, ELLs vary in their English proficiency levels and individual characteristics.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's statutory definition, ELLs, sometimes referred to as *limited English proficient* students, are students whose native language is other than English and "whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language" may prevent the individual from succeeding in the classroom and on state assessments. Various states and districts, however, apply their own criteria to determine which students are officially assigned ELL status. **A unique characteristic of the ELL subgroup is its instability; students who learn English well enough to pass language proficiency tests move out of the subgroup as new students who don't pass the test move in.** The success—or failure—of ELLs can "count double" (or more) in adequate yearly progress (AYP) calculations because a student with an ELL classification may also belong to other NCLB subgroups (e.g., ethnic group, special education, free and reduced-price lunch).

Historically, the academic performance of ELLs has been lower than that of other subgroups, and the achievement gap has narrowed little over the years (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). Recent NAEP data demonstrate a substantial and persistent gap in both reading and math across grade levels.

On average, ELLs receive lower grades in school and have higher drop-out rates than other students (WWC, n.d.). **Improving the academic performance of ELLs, especially those in Grades 6-12, is a complex undertaking, and research doesn't have all the answers;** however, researcher Michael Kamil states, "There is an emerging picture of what can be done to improve the literacy of these students" (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007, p. 5).

**History of Debate and Research on Educating ELL Students**

The unique educational disadvantages faced by ELLs in U.S. schools were formally recognized as a civil rights issue with the passage of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, which established funding for bilingual education programs. In *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974), the Supreme Court ruled on behalf of the Chinese students in San Francisco that "merely providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum, for students who do not understand English" did not constitute equal education under the Civil Rights Act. School districts were ordered to take "affirmative steps" to help ELLs gain full access to an education, but no particular program or method was specified. Four years

later, Congress restricted federal support for bilingual education by amending the Bilingual Education Act so that it supported only transitional programs for non-English-speaking students.

The stage was set for the “language wars.” In 1986, as researchers were finding evidence of a positive relationship between bilingual education and cognitive development (e.g., Diaz, 1985), California voters passed Proposition 63, an English-only ballot initiative that permitted individuals to sue state and local governments for actions that ignored or detracted from English as the common language. The debate on bilingual vs. immersion programs in education continued into the next decade. In 1997, after a rigorous review of research on language programs and effective schools and classrooms, the National Research Council concluded that native language instruction is one of many components of effective schooling for ELLs. The Council recommended that researchers try to pinpoint effective features of programs and instruction instead of focusing solely on bilingual vs. immersion programs. A year later, however, California voters approved Proposition 227. This measure restricted bilingual instruction and resulted in most ELLs receiving a year of sheltered English immersion before being transferred to regular classrooms.

In the early 1990s, the era of standards and accountability coincided with a dramatic increase in the immigrant population and raised questions about test reliability for ELLs. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 further spotlighted the need to help ELLs not only to “learn English” but also to perform well on academic measures. This shift in emphasis resulted in widespread examination of research and policy related to the education of ELLs. For instance, the American Educational Research Association published a policy paper in 2004 calling for **increased resources and commitment for supporting academic achievement among ELLs**. In 2006, the National Council of Teachers of English issued a position paper on the role of English teachers in educating ELLs. The What Works Clearinghouse, established in 2002, has begun publishing its reviews of interventions designed to improve the English language literacy or academic achievement of elementary school students who are ELLs. In 2006, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth published its 669-page report on developing literacy in second-language learners.

**What the recent deluge of ELL-focused reports, research summaries, books, and policy papers have in common is a disclaimer about the paucity of scientifically based research available to guide policy and practice when it comes to instructing ELLs in English.** For example, Fred Genesee and colleagues (2006) found very few experimental or quasi-experimental studies when they reviewed the research on K-12 learning outcomes for ELLs in U.S. schools. The authors acknowledge that most of the evidence included in their synthesis is derived from program evaluations or descriptive studies, most of which involve Spanish speakers at the elementary school level. The What Works Clearinghouse, as of early 2007, had given its highest rating (*strong evidence of a positive effect*) to none of the K-6 ELL interventions reviewed.

A national panel concluded 10 years ago that most of the ELL research available to them focused on English acquisition, not mastery of academic content (August & Hakuta, 1997). This is still true. The recent review of the literature by The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (referred to hereafter as the National Literacy Panel) indicates that **research focused on mastery of academic content is still limited (August & Shanahan, 2006).**

Another disclaimer evident in many research summaries involves **the complexity of the topic**. In the concluding chapter of *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*, Catherine Snow refers to **summarizing research on second-language literacy as “a Herculean task.”** She notes that understanding the development of second-language literacy skills requires understanding of (1) the complexity of the reading process, (2) **individual differences**, (3) linguistic and cognitive development, and (4) the **context** in which second-language learners develop reading (August & Shanahan, 2006, pp. 631-632).

Public debate continues on the question of bilingual education vs. immersion or “English-only” education. This debate is occurring against the backdrop of dramatic increases in immigration, the globalization of the economy, and security concerns sparked by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These events have spurred calls for “English only” and limits on immigration, but have also prompted calls for second-language acquisition for all U.S. students, especially in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

### Three Aspects of Mastery

The terms English language proficiency, academic English proficiency, and content mastery are often used to describe distinct but strongly related aspects of learning for ELLs. As used in this paper:

- **English language proficiency** refers to the ability to speak, read, write, and comprehend the English language in general.
- **Academic English proficiency** refers specifically to the ability to speak, read, write, and comprehend academic English, which is characterized by academic and content-specific vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and the processes of academic discourse (e.g., interpretation and analysis of data or text).
- **Content mastery** refers to students’ ability to demonstrate mastery of subject-area knowledge on academic measures.

Meanwhile, the recent domestic policy focus on academic achievement, coupled with the persistent achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs, has caused researchers and educators to take a closer look at how to help ELLs master not only English but also academic content.

NCLB’s focus on academic performance among ELLs, as opposed to basic language proficiency (e.g., conversational and word-reading skills), has sparked an interest in research on *academic English*, the kind of language used in textbooks and classrooms but not usually in social situations.

### Currently, How Long Does It Take for ELLs to Be Classified as Proficient?

English language proficiency tests are used to help identify ELLs, determine their placement, and demonstrate their progress in attaining English (NCELA, 2007). Several problems and limitations have been associated with the English language proficiency tests. Most, for example, have not been good predictors of student success on reading and content-area assessments in English over time. Most do not supply teachers with information about the student’s individual language strengths and weaknesses. The state of assessments for oral proficiency and academic language lags behind assessments of phonological awareness, word reading accuracy, and fluency (August & Shanahan, 2006). Problems associated with the classification of ELLs include the lack of diagnostic assessments for reading comprehension and the lack of research to guide the placement and instruction of ELLs with various types of learning disabilities (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

At least two studies have identified a correlation between English language proficiency and achievement on large-scale academic assessments. In Texas, ELLs’ level of English proficiency on the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey was found to be highly correlated with their scores on statewide assessments of reading, math, and writing (Oakeley & Urrabazo, 2001). A study in Colorado reported similar results in a study of 200 fourth- and fifth-grade ELLs in four elementary schools (Mahon, 2006). However, researchers at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing have found “a weak relationship between ELL classification codes” and ELL scores on both language proficiency tests and achievement tests (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). Cross-study and interstate comparisons often are not possible because not all states have approved for district use the same English language proficiency tests. According to NCELA, various states are

using at least 24 different proficiency tests, and **the choice of test can affect the reported English language proficiency levels of students**. For example, the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery uses age-equivalent norms for native speakers, but not all native English speakers achieve a rating of proficient on the test, suggesting that proficiency results on this test were confounded with academic achievement or other factors (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; MacSwan & Pray, 2005). By contrast, in field testing of the Bilingual Syntax Measure, all native speakers of English were rated proficient (MacSwan & Pray).

In addition, the National Literacy Panel found very little research on the methods used by districts to classify, track, and reclassify ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 595). In 2001-2002, Mahoney and MacSwan (2005) examined the results of a national survey of state policies on identification and classification of ELLs and concluded that state practices “may lead to errors in identification and reclassification of ELLs, which may in turn have negative consequences for students.”

In short, there is a great deal of variation in the criteria districts use to reclassify students and in the proficiency tests used to help make decisions about reclassification. **There is also much variation in the length of time it can take for an individual student to be classified as proficient in English**. The National Literacy Panel found only four studies that “examined whether a measure used for placement decisions was useful or appropriate,” and “none of these studies was of sufficient magnitude to allow decisive or comprehensive conclusions to be drawn” (p. 592). The limited available research suggests that **it can take ELLs 3 to 6 years to be reclassified as proficient, and sometimes longer**.

A study that perhaps represents a “best-case scenario” was conducted in six Arizona schools with well-designed bilingual education programs. Researchers MacSwan and Pray (2005) examined the records of all 89 ELLs who, on enrollment in the district (in Grades K-3), had scored a 1 (*no English*) on the Bilingual Syntax Measure, and who had been tested at least every 2 years. The children achieved a score of 5 or 6 (*proficient*) after a mean of 3.3 years. English (conversational) proficiency was achieved by about two thirds of the children after 4 years and by more than 90% after 5 years. **Large-scale studies in California, however, indicate that it might take some ELLs 6 to 10 years to be reclassified as proficient, while some ELLs never achieve classification at the highest levels.**

For example:

□ In the fall of 2002, about 1.3 million California students took the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), which measures English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. CELDT scores range from Level 1 to Level 5; a student scoring 4 or 5 may be eligible for reclassification as English-fluent. Of the students tested in both 2001 and 2002, about half improved at least one level over the year. Such gains were more common at lower proficiency levels; 70% of students who had scored at Level 1 in 2001 improved by at least one level in 2002. Projections based on the CELDT data estimated that only about half of kindergartners would be reclassified as fluent after 6 years. However, there were large differences among speakers of different languages; 85% of Mandarin-speaking kindergartners were projected to reach English proficiency by the sixth grade (Hill, 2004). Student gains in 2003 and 2004 were similar to those in 2002 (Hill, 2006).

□ Jepsen and de Alth (2005) analyzed California ELL students’ growth rates on the CELDT in 2002 and 2003. For Spanish speakers (who constitute 85 percent of the ELLs in California schools), the average annual growth in English proficiency was 0.8 proficiency level in Grades K-5 and 0.4-0.5 proficiency level in Grades 6-12. About 8% of the state’s ELLs were reclassified to English-proficient status in 2003. Districts varied both in their reclassification rate and in the criteria used to reclassify students.

□ Parrish, Perez, Merickel, and Linqianti (2006) conducted an exhaustive 5-year study of the impact of Proposition 227 on the education of California's ELLs. They found that the likelihood of an English learner meeting the criteria for reclassification as English-proficient after 10 years in California schools was less than 40 percent. Keep in mind that the preceding discussion concerns how long it takes for ELLs to achieve reclassification, not how ready they are to succeed in English-only classrooms without additional support, or how long it takes for them to achieve proficiency in academic English, or how long it takes for them to perform well on academic achievement measures. The National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 600) found that the relationship between ELLs' performance on proficiency measures and on academic measures has been investigated by only three groups of researchers, and these investigations generally focused on reading achievement. Data from English oral language proficiency tests should not be the sole basis for making exit decisions, according to experts in second-language acquisition (August & Hakuta, 1997; Collier, 1995). These experts "recommend that decisions about reclassification and assessment policies be based on measures of students' academic language proficiency in English" (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 595).

### **On Average, How Long Does It Currently Take for English Language Learners to Acquire Academic English?**

Academic English (the kind of language used in textbooks and educational settings but not usually in social situations) was first distinguished from *social English* (the kind of language used on the playground) by Cummins in 1979. Since then, various researchers have defined the term in several ways and have sometimes used it interchangeably with the terms *academic language* and *academic literacy*.

For example, the American Educational Research Association has defined academic English as "the ability to read, write, and engage in substantive conversations about math, science, history, and other school subjects" (Resnick, 2004, p. 2). In a 2006 meta-analysis of instructional and academic interventions for ELLs, the Center on Instruction describes academic English as including academic vocabulary, word complexity, sentence structure, syntax, organization of ideas, and the function of transitions (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Keiffer, & Rivera, 2006a). Some aspects of academic language are specific to grade levels or grade clusters, some are content-specific, and some are common across grade levels and subject areas (Bailey & Butler, 2003).

Related skills include the ability to summarize, analyze, extract and interpret meaning, evaluate evidence, compose, and edit (NCELA, 2007).

The National Literacy Panel concluded that "considerable future research is needed to develop valid and reliable measures" of academic language proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, studies conducted to date indicate that it takes 4 to 7 years for ELLs to become proficient in academic English:

□ Collier (1995, citing a series of studies by Collier and Thomas) found that ELLs took 7 to 10 years to develop academic proficiency in English if they had no schooling in their first language and 5 to 7 years to develop such proficiency if they had 2 to 3 years of formal schooling in their native country. Across a variety of studies and through examination of many large datasets, Collier and Thomas determined that the amount of formal schooling in the first language was the most significant student background variable affecting academic English language acquisition. Uninterrupted cognitive development is the key to understanding the role of first-language schooling.

□ Oakeley, Urrabazo, and Yang (1998) examined growth rates in academic language proficiency over a 3-year period for more than 9,000 ELLs in Texas and projected future growth. They used the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey, which categorizes proficiency on a scale of 1 to 4. Over a 3-year period, none of the students reached level 4. **Most of the students who started at level 1 were**

**not projected to reach level 4 by the end of 5 to 7 years.** On the other hand, most students who started at level 2 or 3 were projected to reach the 3-4 band in 5 to 7 years. These results did not differ by program type (e.g., bilingual versus English as a Second Language).

□ Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) tracked the development of English language proficiency among 1,872 elementary students who had been categorized as ELL in kindergarten in two large California districts. **On average, students took 3 to 5 years to develop oral proficiency and 4 to 7 years to develop academic English proficiency.** Instruments used were the Idea Proficiency Test and the academically oriented Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery (WLPB). The WLPB gives age-equivalent norms relative to native speakers for academic language proficiency in 12 areas; the gap between ELL students and native speakers in academic English language use in basic reading, broad reading, and reading comprehension was 1 year in the first and third grades but widened to 2 years by the fifth grade.

□ Using data from three statewide administrations of the writing assessment component of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), Moore and Zainuddin (2003) found that ELLs who achieved parity in academic language with their English-proficient peers (as measured by the FCAT) had considerable exposure to academic English: 3 to 5 years of exposure for ELLs in the fourth grade and at least 5 to 6 years of exposure for ELLs in the eighth and tenth grades. Their findings “refute the notion that ELLs need only 1-2 years of support, test accommodations, or one-time exemptions before they can compete successfully with fully English proficient students on measures of academic language proficiency such as state-mandated standardized tests” (p. 1). The Center on Instruction concluded in its recent meta-analysis that, **for native English speakers as well as ELLs, “proficient use of—and control over—academic language is the key to content area learning”** (Francis et al., 2006a, p. 7). Fred Genesee and colleagues (2006) concluded, “Even in English-only school settings, emphasis on English for academic purposes is likely to have the greatest payoff in student achievement” (p. 225).

### **What Individual Factors Affect ELLs’ Development of Fluency in English?**

**Among the individual factors that can affect ELLs’ development of fluency in English are age, previous learning, socioeconomic status, immigration status, parents’ educational levels, and individual attitudes and motivation.**

**Age.** Age interacts with other individual and environmental factors in complex ways. For example, McLaughlin (1984, cited in Guerrero) found that adult learners acquired a second language at a faster rate than young children in experimental conditions, presumably because older learners had a more developed first language, more developed memory and pattern recognition, and more knowledge about the world to contribute to comprehension. At first glance, this finding seems counterintuitive to the often-repeated belief that children learn second languages more quickly and easily than adults. However, what **linguistic studies show is that children who begin learning a second language before adolescence exhibit more native-like pronunciation and are more likely to become fluent speakers.** “Research comparing children to adults has consistently demonstrated that adolescents and adults perform better than young children [in areas other than pronunciation] under controlled conditions” (ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 1992, p. 1).

Also, keep in mind that **ELLs in a school setting are faced with the dual challenge of learning academic content as well as English.** At least one study indicates that younger ELLs attain English at a faster rate than adolescent ELLs in a school setting. Jepsen and de Alth (2005) analyzed California ELL students’ growth rates on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and found that 1-year gains among elementary students were generally less than 1 proficiency level (the CELDT has 5 proficiency levels); the average gain of elementary Spanish speakers was 0.80 proficiency level. **Older students exhibited a slower rate of growth than elementary students.** However, the authors note that most ELLs start in U.S. schools in the elementary grades. Therefore, it may be that some students who are still classified as ELLs in the upper grades have lower ability or

motivation than their classmates who were reclassified as English proficient by the time they reached the upper grades. Or perhaps some students need more or different help than others as they encounter higher academic language demands in middle and high school.

**Previous learning.** ELLs who have formal schooling in their first language develop proficiency in English faster than ELLs who have had no formal schooling in their first language. After examining a variety of studies, including many that involved large datasets, Collier (1995) concluded that the amount of formal schooling in the first language was the most significant student background variable affecting English language acquisition for ELLs. In a study involving 100 Hispanic students in Grades 6-12, randomly selected in a Midwestern school district, standardized achievement test scores (tests in English) were significantly related to level of English language proficiency, but were also significantly related to Spanish language proficiency (reading and writing). Writing proficiency in Spanish, which requires a relatively high level of cognitive academic language proficiency, was significantly related to the scores of all English-language achievement subtests: composite, language, math, reading, and vocabulary (García-Vázquez, Vázquez, López, & Ward, 1997).

These findings are in line with those of Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian (2006). In their research synthesis, they observe that oral language and reading comprehension skills developed in a student's first language, combined with a student's general knowledge about the topic of study, relate directly to the student's ability to transfer skills and conceptual knowledge from the first language to English.

**Socioeconomic status.** According to an Urban Institute analysis of the 2000 Census, about two-thirds of ELL children come from low-income families (Capps et al., 2005). Correlations between student achievement and socioeconomic status are not limited to native English speakers. For example, Rumberger and Tran (2006) found that for all children, preschool attendance was related to more advanced cognitive development at kindergarten entry. Their study, which used Head Start participation as a proxy for socioeconomic status, found that students who attended non-Head Start programs had higher literacy scores at kindergarten entry than students who attended Head Start or who did not attend preschool. ELLs were less likely than non-ELLs to attend non-Head Start programs, and ELLs attended such programs for shorter periods of time than did non-ELL students; these differences were more pronounced for ELLs from Spanish-dominant households than for ELLs from "other-language"-dominant households.

Jepsen and de Alth (2005) analyzed California students' growth rates on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Students who spoke Korean, Mandarin, and Russian had the highest rates of growth, while students who spoke Hmong and Khmer had the lowest rates. These differences were related to ethnic-group differences in family income and parent education. In addition, Title I students had smaller gains than other students.

Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) tracked the development of English language proficiency among elementary students in two large California districts who had been categorized as ELL in kindergarten. ELL students at high-poverty schools (at least 70 percent free lunch) acquired English more slowly than students at other schools. Students whose parents had the highest educational attainment acquired English more rapidly than other students Immigrant ELLs. About 44 percent of the English language learners enrolled in U.S. middle and high schools, and 24 percent of ELLs in elementary schools were born outside the United States, according to 2000 census data (Francis et al., 2006b). Students who are new not only to the language but also to the United States—and sometimes to formal schooling itself—present a unique set of difficulties among ELLs. Igoa (1995, cited in Guerrero) described a period of sociocultural adjustment or "uprooting" in which immigrant students may experience depression or confusion due to their inability to communicate and may go through a "silent stage." This adjustment period may last 1 to 2 years. Rutherford (2006) found that, at kindergarten entry, ELL children of immigrants had significantly lower scores on the Oral Language Development Scale (which assesses oral English language ability) and on "school

readiness” math scores than ELL children whose parents had been born in the United States. On these same assessments, Hispanic ELL children scored significantly lower than other racial/ethnic groups. The Center on Instruction notes that immigrant ELLs who enter U.S. schools at the secondary level are trying to learn academic content while simultaneously learning conversational and academic English in its oral and written forms and adjusting to a new culture and new school routines (Francis et al., 2006a).

**Parents’ education level.** The educational attainment of ELL students’ parents was cited in several studies (e.g., Jepsen & de Alth, 2005; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). In a correlational study of more than 30,000 students, the reading scores of ELLs whose parents had post-graduate education were 15 percentile points higher than the scores of ELLs whose parents were not high school graduates (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). The Urban Institute researchers found that almost half of ELL children in elementary schools have parents who did not finish high school, and about a quarter have parents who did not finish ninth grade (Capps et al, 2005).

**Individual student factors.** The National Literacy Panel concluded that individual differences among learners are related to rates and degrees of literacy development for both English speakers and ELLs. Individual factors related to literacy development include “literacy-related skills at school entry; oral language skills, including vocabulary; background knowledge; demographic factors; motivation and engagement; and the presence of dyslexia, learning disabilities, or language impairment” (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Separating individual student characteristics from those commonly shared by ELLs is one of the challenges schools face. For example, the Center on Instruction reports that ELLs are no more or less likely than native English speakers to have difficulty learning to read. Yet schools often delay reading interventions for ELLs, assuming that their reading skills will develop as their English proficiency increases. For ELL and non-ELL students with learning disabilities, delaying appropriate reading interventions can set the stage for further difficulties. In its 2006 review of the research, the National Literacy Panel stated, “Diagnosable disabilities that interfere with normal reading development are estimated to occur in 5 percent to 15 percent of the monolingual population. Presumably, similar percentages of the bilingual population experience such difficulties, although over- and under-identification of English-language learners with learning disabilities related to the difficulty of accurate identification and assessment have complicated efforts to arrive at reliable estimates” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 59).

For all students, individual attitudes and motivation can influence student learning. In an exploration of Gardner’s socio-educational model of second language acquisition, Masgoret and Gardner (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of studies by Gardner and associates that included 75 independent samples containing more than 10,000 individuals. The study looked at Gardner’s three major components related to individual attitudes and motivation: (1) attitudes toward the learning situation (attitudes toward course and teacher); (2) “integrativeness” (attitudes toward the target language community and culture and interest in foreign languages); and (3) learning motivation. All three components were positively and consistently related to achievement in the second language, with learning motivation having the strongest correlation. The relationships were not much affected by the availability of the language in the environment or the age of the learners. It should be noted here that, although attitude and motivation are usually considered individual factors, they are also embedded in the social context of learning, and schools may be able to have some influence on them.

### **Given Sufficient Resources, What Educational Practices Can Help English Language Learners Acquire Academic English?**

The No Child Left Behind legislation has increased accountability for the academic achievement among ELLs by designating ELLs as a subgroup for AYP reporting purposes. Proficiency in academic English has been identified as a key to academic success for ELLs in recent analyses of the research



literature (e.g., Genesee et al., 2006; Francis et al., 2006a). So, what can local education agencies do to help ELLs acquire academic English? Examination of the research on accountability systems, school change, and ELL education suggests that school districts need to take a systematic approach. Districts operate within federal and state contexts, and **some systemic problems related to improving educational outcomes for ELLs lie outside the direct influence of the district.** For example, state content standards may not emphasize academic language equally across subject areas. A comparison of fifth-grade English Language Development standards and science standards in California illustrates the case.

Researchers who examined the standards found a high degree of linkage in both breadth (types of language demands) and depth (complexity of demands) but not in vocabulary demands (Bailey, Butler, & Sato, 2005). The following discussion, however, focuses on those aspects of education that are under local control—educational practices at the school, program, and classroom levels.

### **What School Factors Affect ELLs' Fluency in English?**

Many of the attributes of effective schools also support ELL achievement, according to the National Research Council. In its 1997 report, the Council identified 13 attributes of effective schools and classrooms that especially benefit ELL students: a supportive but challenging school-wide climate; strong instructional leadership at the school level; a learning environment that is customized to meet the identified instructional needs of students; articulation and coordination of programs and practices; use of native language and valuing of home cultures; a curriculum that balances basic and higher-order skills; explicit skills instruction in both basic skills and learning strategies; opportunities for student-directed activities; instructional strategies that enhance comprehension; opportunities for practice; systematic use of student assessments in making instructional decisions; high-quality staff development; and family involvement (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Although the National Literacy Panel found no empirical evidence linking cultural accommodations directly to student achievement, case study research suggests that cross-cultural understanding in school-family interactions and **culturally responsive instruction can enhance students' motivation, participation, and engagement** (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Research suggests that a systematic approach to school improvement is important; the school change research “indicates that outside agents can help the process, but also that change is difficult to achieve” (August & Shanahan, 2006). The following school factors seem particularly beneficial to ELLs:

**School-wide commitment to ELL achievement.** In a 5-year study of impact of Proposition 227, interviews in the schools most successful with ELLs identified three common factors: (1) staff with the training and capabilities to address ELLs' linguistic and cognitive needs, (2) a school-wide focus on English language development, and (3) data-driven instruction (Parrish et al., 2006). After reviewing the literature on adolescent ELL literacy and studying three promising programs for ELLs, the Center for Applied Linguistics concluded that administrators can support school-wide commitment to ELL achievement by securing high-quality staff development and providing opportunities for collaboration among subject-area teachers, teachers of English as a Second Language, special education teachers, and literacy coaches (Short & Fitzsimons, 2007, pp. 22-26).

**Consistent language support services of adequate duration across all grade levels.** Efforts to develop language proficiency should be “early, ongoing, and intensive” and should include sufficient opportunities for oral English language development, which has been shown to aid comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006). Evaluation studies show that “students exposed to a variety of different approaches perform poorly in comparison to students who have had consistent exposure to the same program over time” (Genesee et al., 2006). ELL instruction in preschool and the elementary grades should focus on reading, first on decoding and later on comprehension (Abedi, 2004; August &

Shanahan, 2006). ELLs in middle school and high school should receive explicit literacy instruction, with special attention to vocabulary and background knowledge (August & Shanahan).

Research is limited on how to address the learning needs specific to ELLs in secondary schools, especially vocabulary development, oral language proficiency, comprehension of challenging texts, instruction for dealing with academic text structures, and interactions between reading comprehension and content area learning (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 641). The Center on Instruction reports that “ELLs—whether formally designated LEP [limited English proficient] or not—often lack the academic language necessary for comprehending and analyzing text.” The Center notes that “exposure to more linguistically challenging text is often long after these learners have stopped receiving specialized language support” (Francis et al., 2006a, p. 14).

Secondary school leaders, in particular, may need to arrange schedules so that content and language development teachers can work together and offer individualized instruction (Ruiz-de-Valesco & Fix, 2000). Secondary schools serving immigrant ELLs face a unique set of challenges. Under a contract with the Carnegie Corporation, the Center for Applied Linguistics convened a panel of experts to identify major challenges and solutions to helping adolescent ELLs achieve academic literacy. The panel identified six challenges: lack of common criteria for identifying ELLs and tracking academic achievement; lack of appropriate assessments; inadequate educator capacity; lack of appropriate and flexible program options; inadequate use of research-based instructional practices; and lack of a strong and coherent research agenda (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). The Center on Instruction reviewed the research on adolescent and ELL literacy and identified six instructional elements and interventions as supportive of adolescent immigrants’ academic success, especially during their first 2 years in U.S. schools: appropriate intervention for newcomers with word-reading difficulties, high-quality classroom assessment, content-based literacy instruction, instructional emphasis on developing academic language, explicit comprehension instruction, and instruction in writing for academic purposes (Francis et al., 2006a).

**Increased educator capacity.** In most states, subject-area teachers have little or no training in developing the literacy skills of adolescents, and even fewer have expertise in helping ELLs gain second-language literacy. These teachers need sustained, job-embedded professional development in helping ELLs understand not only course content but also the academic language used to teach the content. Mathematics, for instance, has a vocabulary of its own. Most math teachers, however, have not been trained in adolescent literacy or ELL instruction. Those who receive such training gain an arsenal of instructional techniques that can help not only ELLs, but also native speakers, especially low-performing students (Francis et al., 2006a).

**Match between resources and community served.** The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth concluded in 2006 that overall, inclusion of some first-language instruction seems to have long-term benefits. Doing so, however, can be difficult in districts where ELLs speak several different languages or in small districts with limited resources and a relatively small population of ELLs. The Center on Instruction recommends that school districts base ELL instructional guidelines on the size and characteristics of its ELL population. For example, decisions about whether to implement a given intervention as a class-wide or supplemental approach would depend in part on the diversity of ELL students and their needs (Francis et al., 2006a). Schools with a large number of newly arrived immigrants need to address the increased demand for transitional programs and services related to assessment, placement, referral, and orientation (Olsen, 2006).

Educational problems differ for children at high- and low-ELL schools. Schools with sizeable ELL subgroups tend to have higher numbers of subgroups overall (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). A correlational study based on data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey found that 70% of elementary-school ELLs in the United States were found in 10 percent of schools. These high-ELL schools are usually urban, with students who are largely minority and poor. Many are characterized by the typical

problems of poor schools—more child health problems and lower levels of qualified teachers. In California, researchers have found that elementary schools with high percentages of ELLs had lower rates of reclassifying students as English proficient than elementary schools with low percentages of ELLs (Jepsen & de Alth, 2005). This finding may indicate a shortage of resources for ELLs in high-ELL schools. On the other hand, low-ELL schools are less likely than high-ELL schools to offer remedial programs or bilingual education programs; to have standardized procedures for identifying ELLs; or to provide professional development related to ELL needs (Constentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

Schools serving an ELL population that speaks the same first language may need to take special care to increase these students' opportunities to learn academic English. Jepsen and de Alth (2005) found that the school-level homogeneity of California students' first language is inversely related to a school's rate of reclassifying ELLs as proficient in English. In other words, it takes longer for students to achieve reclassification in schools where a large number of ELLs speak the same first language. The researchers theorize that these ELLs may have fewer opportunities (and perhaps less motivation) to learn English.

### **What Program Factors Affect English Language Learners' Proficiency in English?**

Genesee and colleagues (2006) identified 11 studies that examined ELL program factors associated with effective schooling. Programs that were "relatively effective" shared several characteristics. They operated within the context of a positive school environment in which the staff shared the belief that all children can learn. They had a meaningful curriculum that incorporated higher-order thinking and was aligned with standards and assessments. The program model was "grounded in sound theory and best practices associated with an enriched, not remedial, instructional model" (p. 187). The teachers understood the theories, goals, and rationales behind the model in use; and students were placed in a program that was consistent and sustained. Other research illuminates the role of the three program factors discussed below:

#### **The amount of first-language instruction included in the program, reading instruction, and oral language development.**

Amount of first-language instruction included in the program. In 1997, after a rigorous review of research on language programs and effective schools and classrooms, the National Research Council concluded that native language instruction is one of many components of effective schooling for ELLs (August & Hakuta, 1997). In 2006, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth examined program evaluations and studies of cross-language relationships and found that oral proficiency and literacy in ELLs' first language can facilitate literacy development in English. The panel concluded that inclusion of some first-language instruction seems to have long-term benefits (August & Shanahan, 2006). This conclusion can be supported by the results of several recent meta-analyses that compare bilingual and immersion (English-only) programs:

- In a 5-year study, Thomas and Collier (2002) looked at the records of thousands of students who had entered their school district in Grades K-1 with little or no English proficiency. On standardized tests of English total reading, scores at the end of high school were at the 12th percentile for students immersed in English because their parents refused bilingual or ESL (English as a Second Language) services; at the 23<sup>rd</sup> percentile for ESL content classes for 2 to 3 years followed by English immersion; and at the 45th percentile for students who received 50-50 bilingual education for 3 to 4 years followed by English immersion. Two-way bilingual immersion students performed above grade level in Grades 1-5 and scored at the 51st percentile at the end of Grade 5.
- Slavin and Cheung (2003) used a "best-evidence synthesis" to review experimental studies of reading programs for ELLs, focusing on comparisons between bilingual and immersion programs. They found few high-quality studies. Most of these favored bilingual education; some were inconclusive; none showed significant favorable outcomes for immersion approaches.

□ Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 studies carried out between 1985 and 1995 on the academic progress of ELLs in various types of programs. Among more than 300 studies identified, 17 met the following criteria: (1) subjects were K-12 language minority students not in special education; (2) data needed to conduct a meta-analysis were present; and (3) treatment and comparison programs were described adequately. The academic progress of ELLs in bilingual education was consistently superior to that of ELLs in all-English programs. Developmental bilingual programs (which maintain the native language) were superior to transitional bilingual programs (which use the native language only to ease the transition to English).

□ Krashen and McField (2005) summarized the findings of six meta-analyses that compared the academic performance of children in bilingual education and English-only programs. Looking across meta-analyses at studies that used tests of English reading comprehension, and excluding studies in which fluent English speakers were the comparisons, the results consistently favored bilingual education.

□ Genesee and colleagues (2006) examined 200 studies and reports and found that K-3 students in bilingual programs typically scored below grade level, but assessments in Grades 4-12 showed that the “educational outcomes of bilingually educated students, especially in late-exit and two-way programs, were at least comparable to, and usually higher than, their comparison peers” (p. 375). Parrish, Perez, Merickel, and Linqianti (2006), however, maintained a neutral position on the potential benefits of bilingual education in their report of a study of the impact of Proposition 227 in California, conducted by the American Institutes for Research and WestEd. Using data from 1.5 million ELLs and 3.5 million English-proficient and native English-speaking students, researchers concluded “there is no evidence to support an argument of the superiority of one English learner instructional approach over another,” but noted that state data about district programs were limited. For instance, the way a district labels its program—*bilingual* or *English immersion*—is not necessarily an accurate description of what goes on in the classroom.

Inconsistency in the use of the terms *bilingual* and *immersion* in program descriptions is an ongoing challenge for researchers comparing program types. In bilingual education, students are taught some subjects in their native tongue while they are learning English—sometimes for months, and sometimes for years. In immersion, all or most instruction is offered in English, usually a simplified form supplemented by verbal and contextual clues to aid understanding. In practice, however, programs labeled as one or the other often include components of both, and native-language instruction of different degrees and duration can be involved in either type of program (Linqianti, 1999).

The fact that program labels are not standardized, in addition to the presence of many interdependent factors in second-language learning, might explain why researchers have yet to produce “strong proof of any causal relation implicating transfer” (the carry-over of first-language knowledge to second-language learning). Such transfer is part of the theoretical base for bilingual education. Correlational research certainly suggests that transfer exists, but, as Catherine Snow points out, “alternative explanations are not systematically ruled out.” This gap in the research knowledge leaves room for ideological and political debate about the merits of bilingual education.

Reading instruction. In its 2000 report on the research on reading, the National Reading Panel identified five components of reading to be addressed in reading instruction: phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The literature examined by the National Reading Panel, however, did not include research on the development of language and literacy among ELLs. The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth subsequently examined the five components of reading in the light of ELL-specific research and

found that ELLs can benefit from instruction focused on the five components—if such instruction is adjusted to meet the specific needs of ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006).

The results of a quasi-experimental study by Callahan (2006) suggest that programs focused solely on reading at the expense of English language development are insufficient for supporting the academic success of ELLs. In 2002, Callahan compared the effects of a reading intervention, as opposed to traditional English language development, on ELL achievement in a California high school. (English Language Development curricula integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking and include instruction that is specific to academic content areas.) The study documented a drop in California Standards Test (CST) scores among ELL students who received the reading intervention in place of the English Language Development curriculum. Also, ELL students who received the English Language Development curriculum posted significantly higher CST Language Arts scores than students in the reading intervention group.

**Oral language development.** The findings of the National Literacy Panel underscore the point that teaching the key components of reading is not sufficient for supporting the overall English language development of ELLs. The panel found several studies showing that most ELLs can develop word recognition, spelling, and decoding skills that are on par with English-speaking students, yet lag behind in reading comprehension and vocabulary. Noting that oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading and writing skills, the panel concluded that “the oral English development provided in most programs is insufficient” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 16). Recommended are intensive instruction in vocabulary, background knowledge, and literacy strategies, in addition to literacy skills.

### **What Classroom Factors Affect ELLs’ Fluency in English?**

Within the context of the school and the ELL program are classrooms in which teachers make daily decisions about instruction that will affect the educational outcomes for their students. Nationally, there is one certified English as a Second Language teacher for every 44 students, on average, though the ratio in particular states ranges from 1:9 to 1:688 (Kindler, 2002). Professional development in meeting the educational needs of ELLs is an ongoing need. Teachers need to understand why and how to increase ELLs’ opportunity to learn academic English. They need to use a comprehensive framework for delivering academic instruction. And they need to be able to differentiate instruction to promote the success of all students, including ELLs.

Opportunity to learn academic English. Most ELLs can master verbal and word-reading skills, but many—including some who no longer qualify for language support services—do not always comprehend what they are reading. The reasons for such difficulties are not entirely clear (Francis et al., 2006a). As the focus of instruction shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*, poor reading comprehension can prevent ELLs from meeting higher-level demands, such as analyzing text or writing about what they have read. The Center on Instruction, in its review of research on instruction and academic interventions for ELLs, concludes that ELLs can benefit from explicit instruction in academic English across all content areas, including mathematics (Francis et al., 2006a).

Little empirical research exists on effective instructional strategies for teaching content. Genesee et al. (2006) identified only five studies that examined instructional strategies specific to content instruction as opposed to literacy. Generally, however, the Center on Instruction recommends vocabulary instruction that is frequent, intensive, systematic, and complex. It should include words that are important to understanding the text but not commonly used in conversation (e.g., *determine*, *whereas*, and *factor*). Especially problematic for ELLs are words with multiple meanings. For example, *odd*, *root*, and *field* take on special meanings in the context of mathematics. Multiple exposures to academic and content-specific words across domains (reading, writing, speaking, and

listening) can reinforce vocabulary learning. To gain deep understanding, students need 12 to 14 exposures to each targeted word (Francis et al., 2006a).

ELLs also need to learn strategies for comprehending and analyzing challenging narrative and expository texts. The Center on Instruction recommends explicitly teaching students to make predictions before they read, to monitor their own understanding as they read, to reflect on the strategies they use to increase text comprehension, and to summarize what they have read. *Repeated reading* is cited as an intervention that has been used successfully with ELLs. Students practice orally reading a text passage to a supportive partner (usually an adult) until the passage can be read expressively, with very few errors. The partner provides corrective feedback and may ask the student to summarize the passage, discuss it, or answer questions (Francis et al., 2006a).

ELLs also need opportunities to engage in structured academic talk and can benefit from purposeful independent readings that are matched to the reader's ability level; the student should be able to read and understand 90 percent of the text (Francis et al., 2006a).

Aguirre-Muñoz and colleagues (2006) found that without specific training, teachers gave ELL students little explicit instruction in the "functional grammar" of academic English. In a quasi-experimental study, students in classrooms where teachers frequently gave such direct instruction had higher scores on the Language Arts Performance Assignment than students who received little direct instruction. Both ELL and non-ELL students benefited from direct instruction in academic English.

A descriptive study of 144 sixth-grade French-speaking students in Quebec participating in intensive English as a Second Language classes illustrates the importance of such explicit instruction. This study found that the students accepted ungrammatical forms of English questions when such constructions were acceptable in French. To move students to the highest levels of English proficiency, explicit instruction and corrective feedback must focus both on what is and is not possible, grammatically, in English (Spada & Lightbown, 1999).

Use of a comprehensive framework for instruction. The Center on Instruction (Torgesen et al., 2007) prefaces its recommendations with the statement that the efficacy of each instructional strategy "depends on its integration into a comprehensive program of instruction" (p. 94). Genesee and colleagues (2006) concur: "Educators need comprehensive frameworks for selecting, sequencing, and delivering instruction over the course of an entire year and from grade to grade" (p. 231). Some empirical support exists for at least two such frameworks: The Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP) is a model of instruction that is both a classroom observation and rating tool and a guide for teachers to tailor their lessons to the needs of their ELL students. Developed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) under a 7-year federal contract, the model focuses on making content comprehensible to ELLs through speech adapted to their proficiency levels and varied instructional techniques, linking content to students' backgrounds, scaffolding instruction to provide appropriate levels of support as students work on complex tasks, and providing ample opportunities for practice and classroom interaction. In one of several quasi-experimental studies, middle-school ELLs whose teachers were trained in the SIOP model improved their performance on an expository writing assessment to a significantly greater extent than comparison students (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

The Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy articulate research-based principles and guidelines for effectively educating both majority and minority students across subject matters, curricula, cultures, and language groups (Tharp et al., 2000, as cited in Genesee et al., 2006). The standards do not endorse a specific curriculum but establish principles for instruction. The standards are (1) teachers and students working together; (2) developing language and literacy skills across the

curriculum; (3) connecting lessons to students' lives; (4) engaging students with challenging lessons; and (5) emphasizing dialogue over lectures (especially through academic, goal-directed, small-group conversations, known as *instructional conversations*).

**Differentiated instruction.** The presence of ELLs in a classroom magnifies the importance of differentiated instruction. Teachers who differentiate instruction carefully consider their students' various abilities, skills, and interests, then strategically plan lessons to accommodate differences among students, thereby increasing the likelihood of success for each student. Many instructional strategies that help English speakers have been found to benefit ELLs. For example, ELLs benefit from many of the instructional strategies found effective for teaching English speakers to read—enhancing phonological awareness when teaching letter-sound relationships, systematically teaching letter-sound relationships, using meaningful and engaging text during letter-sound instruction, and providing timely extra help with students who experience problems (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, instruction in key components of literacy does not benefit ELLs as much as it does students whose first language is English, unless it is enhanced or adjusted to meet the specific needs of ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). The Center on Instruction recommends class-wide instruction in academic language to supplement the skills of English speakers and help prevent difficulties for ELLs.

Variations among all students in the classroom, compounded by variations among ELLs (e.g., in students' first languages, English proficiency levels, and cultural background) make it important for educators to use a variety of instructional techniques that simultaneously help ELLs gain language skills and content knowledge, concluded Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2006). In her analysis of the National Literacy Panel's report, Snow also cites the importance of differentiated instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006). The following instructional components have been cited as potentially helpful to ELLs: clear enunciation and few idioms, visuals and demonstrations, scaffolded instruction, targeted vocabulary development, connections to student experiences, student-to-student interaction, appropriate use of supplementary materials, sufficient opportunities for oral English development, and explicit teaching of language learning strategies (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; August & Shanahan, 2006).

One-on-one or small-group instruction can be used to address difficulties that are shared by only a few students (Rivera et al., 2006). The success of the selected intervention is dependent on the teacher's ability to understand individual students' strengths and weaknesses, determine the source of difficulties, select an appropriate intervention, monitor its effectiveness, and adjust instruction accordingly (Torgesen et al., 2007).

### **What the Research Means for School Districts**

Improving academic success for ELLs is a multi-dimensional challenge. Some challenges must be addressed at the federal or state level—for example, the alignment of state assessments and content standards, and sufficient inclusion of academic English in both. Many decisions about ELL education, however, are made locally. In making these decisions, school and district leaders need to consider the number, diversity, and mobility of the ELLs being served. They must also be responsive to changes in the student population. Although empirical research is not available to guide all aspects of ELL education, the research literature suggests the following:

- Proficiency in academic English—the kind of language used in textbooks and classrooms but not necessarily in social situations—is the key to content-area learning. Increasing students' opportunity to learn academic English, across content areas and grade levels, and across domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) can benefit both ELLs and native English speakers. Studies that have focused on academic English indicate that it generally takes ELLs 4 to 7 years to achieve proficiency in academic English, although

many ELLs do not achieve proficiency during their time in school.

□ Professional development in meeting the educational needs of ELLs is an ongoing need. Teachers need to understand why and how to increase ELLs' opportunity to learn academic English. They also need to use a comprehensive framework for delivering academic instruction, and they need to be able to differentiate instruction to promote the success of all students, including ELLs.

□ Middle schools and secondary school teachers, in particular, need professional development and support in helping ELLs improve their reading comprehension—and their proficiency in academic English—through explicit instruction in literacy strategies, vocabulary, and background knowledge.

□ At the program level, inclusion of some first-language instruction, when possible, can have long-term benefits for ELLs. Also helpful—if enhanced and adjusted to meet ELLs' learning needs—is reading instruction focused on the five components of reading, as identified by the National Reading Panel (phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension). Replacing English language development with a reading intervention, however, can be detrimental to ELLs' academic achievement.

□ Many of the attributes of effective schools can also support ELL achievement. Schoolwide factors that can contribute to the success of ELLs include school-wide commitment to ELL achievement, consistent language support services of adequate duration across all grade levels, sufficient educator capacity, and a match between resources and the community served.

□ Experts recommend basing assessment policies and ELL classification decisions on measures of students' proficiency in academic English. However, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth concluded that valid and reliable measures of academic language proficiency still need to be developed.

□ The methods currently used to classify and place ELLs may result in some students' being pulled out of English language support programs too soon. To help these students get back on track, schools should monitor the academic progress of ELLs who exit language support programs and provide extra help when needed.

Helping individual ELLs master academic language is a multifaceted, long-term process, not an event or a program with a clear “end date.” A statement from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics (1992) is worth repeating: “Research on second language learning has shown that many misconceptions exist about how children learn languages. Teachers need to be aware of these misconceptions and realize that quick and easy solutions are not appropriate for complex problems. Second language learning by school-aged children takes longer, is harder, and involves more effort than many teachers realize” (p. 2). Districts can support both teachers and students in this endeavor by making sure teachers are well prepared, adopting programs that provide sustained and coherent instruction across grade levels, and fostering continuous school improvement with a focus on student learning.





## How long does it take to learn English?

by Judie Haynes

The most frequently asked question of ESL professionals by mainstream teachers, administrators, and even politicians concerns how long it should take English language learners to acquire English.

### The Research

How long does it take to learn English? How long should students receive support in language? These are the most frequently asked questions by administrators, school board members and classroom teachers. The most comprehensive work done in this field is the research conducted by Wayne Thomas & Virginia Collier. Thomas & Collier studied the language acquisition of 700,000 English language learners in a longitudinal study from 1982 to 1996. They wanted to find out how long it took students with no background in English to reach native speaker performance (50th percentile) on norm-referenced tests. In addition, they looked at variables such as socioeconomic status, first language, programs used to learn English, and number of years of primary language schooling. In their study, Thomas & Collier found that **the most significant variable in how long it takes to learn English is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language.**

In one study, Thomas & Collier researched a group of Asian and Hispanic students from an affluent suburban school district receiving 1-3 hours second language support per day in a well-regarded ESL program. These students were generally exited from ESL in the first two years. All of the students researched were at or above grade level in native language literacy. Here are the results for students in this study.

- o Those students who were between 8-11 years old and had 2-3 years of native language education took 5-7 years to test at grade level in English. These were the lucky ones.
- o Students with little or no formal schooling who arrived before the age of eight, took 7-10 years to reach grade level norms in English language literacy.
- o Students who were below grade level in native language literacy also took 7-10 years to reach the 50th percentile. Many of these students never reached grade level norms.

This data holds true regardless of the home language, country of origin, and socioeconomic status. (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

### How do ELLs in ESL Programs Compare?

English language learners receiving ESL services **do not make more rapid progress in English than students in other types of programs.**

Those who teach in ESL programs would say that the above statement is false. They would assert that students in ESL programs outperformed second language learners in any other type of program. Research does not support this belief. Across different types of bilingual and ESL programs, Thomas & Collier found that:

- o English language learners who received all of their schooling in English did extremely well in kindergarten through third grade. The gains these students made in English were dramatic.
- o From fourth grade on through middle and high school, when the academic demands of the curriculum become more rigorous, the performance of these students fell substantially below the 50th percentile. Why did this happen? **Native English speakers make an average gain of ten months each school year. However, English language learners only made a 6-8 month gain per school year. The gap between native-English and second language speakers widened from the 4th grade through high school.** In the Thomas/Collier study the native language students spoke had no influence on these results. Students speaking Spanish made the same progress as those from an Asian background.
- o Students in Two-Way Bilingual Immersion and Developmental Bilingual programs reach the 50th percentile in both their native language and English by 4th or 5th grade in all subject areas. These students were able to sustain the gains made in English, and in some cases, to achieve even higher than typical Native-English-speaker performance as they move through the secondary years of school.

This does not mean that all bilingual programs are more effective than all ESL or sheltered content programs. It is important to look beyond the program label. Are teachers qualified to teach English language learners? Are there sufficient materials? What instructional methods are used? **Are students exited into all English programs too quickly?** Cummins (1998) notes that "quick-exit transitional bilingual

education is an inferior model based on an inadequate theoretical assumption; this model aspires to monolingualism and does little to address the causes of bilingual students' underachievement."

### **What Does this Research Mean for Schools?**

Bilingual programs are not always feasible, especially in school districts where students come from multiple language backgrounds. Here are the key considerations for school districts:

- o Give students more time to develop English language academic skills. Don't rush kindergarten through third grade students through your language support programs.
- o Provide more support services to under-schooled upper elementary and middle school students. Remember that it will take them 7-10 years to reach grade level norms.
- o Maintenance of native language in the home should be encouraged. Development of native language literacy should be fostered. Persuade parents to send their children to after-school and Saturday instruction in first language. If your school district has the requisite number of students, push for a developmental bilingual or two-way immersion program.

### [Comprehensible Input and Output](#)

How do newcomers learn English? Can they soak up language by sitting in the mainstream classroom? Learn how Comprehensible Input and Output are important to the acquisition of a second language.

### [Explaining BICS and CALP](#)

Classroom teachers need to understand the difference between social language and academic language acquisition. Here is a simple description of BICS and CALP as theorized by Jim Cummins.

### [Language Acquisition vs. Language Learning](#)

Should grammar be taught to young elementary age English language learners? Learn what the difference is between language acquisition and language learning.

### [Pre-production and the Silent Period](#)

If your new English language learner is not speaking, don't worry. Most newcomers go through a stage during which they do not produce language. This doesn't mean they are not learning.