

Center for American Progress



Preparing All Teachers to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners

Applying Research to Policy and Practice
for Teacher Effectiveness

Jennifer F. Samson and Brian A. Collins April 2012

C

- 1 Introduction and summary
- 4 Growing numbers of ELL students in the United States
- 8 Insufficient and inconsistent information for teachers
- 12 Ensuring all teachers are adequately prepared to work with ELLs
- 20 Recommendations
- 23 About the authors
- 24 Endnotes



There is a sea change occurring in education across the country in the systematic way that we consider students should be learning and teachers should be evaluated. Recently, nearly all states have adopted and have begun to roll out the Common Core Standards as the benchmark for what students nationwide should know and be able to do at each grade level, K-12. Additionally, in an effort

their classroom and therefore must be prepared to best support these children. In many cases, a general education teacher who knows the content and pedagogy to

education teachers of ELLs. We argue that system-level changes must be made to establish evidence-based practices among general education teachers of ELLs. By comparing and contrasting five key states—California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas—that have large numbers of English language learners, we consider the way in which the specific needs of ELLs are taken into account in educational policies and school-level practices. Our specific aim is to identify essential knowledge and skills that can be purposefully integrated into teacher-development programs and initiatives. In order to improve teacher effectiveness with ELL students we recommend that consistent and specific guidelines on the oral language, academic language, and cultural needs of ELLs be addressed in:

- Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or ESEA
- Revisions to National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education or NCATE Standards
- State regulations
- Teacher-preparation programs
- State certification exams
- Teacher-observation rubrics in performance evaluations
- Professional development linked to teacher evaluations

- The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act) requires all states to identify English language learners, measure their English proficiency, and include these students in state testing programs that assess academic skills.
- Most states identify ELLs upon first enrollment in the school system. An initial home language survey is typically administered (a few questions regarding home language use). For all children whose home language is not English, an assessment of English language proficiency is conducted using a state approved standardized test, for example, Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R), California English Language Development Test (CELDT), and Language Assessment Scales-Oral (LAS-O).
-

Our report focuses on five states with large proportions of English language learners: California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas (see Table 1). National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, results from 2009⁷ (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) show that in California and New York only a small proportion of ELLs are able to achieve at or above basic level in reading in the fourth-grade (25 percent and 29 percent respectively) and obviously perform far below proficient or grade level. The other states fare slightly better, with Florida having the highest percentage of fourth-grade ELL students performing at basic or above in reading. Unfortunately, performance does not seem to improve for older ELL students (see Figure 2). The percentage of non-ELLs performing at or above basic in eighth-grade reading is higher than in fourth-grade, yet the trend reverses for ELL students where lower percentages of ELLs score at basic or above in eighth-grade than in fourth-grade. Among eighth-graders in all states except Florida, 25 percent or fewer of ELLs scored at or above the basic level in reading. In Florida, 41 percent of ELLs scored at or above the basic level in reading.

Achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs



Many teachers of ELLs are increasingly concerned about being held accountable for

requires that they take 15 semester hours in ESL. New York, on the other hand, requires six semester hours in general language acquisition and literacy, which is supposed to apply to native English speakers and ELLs. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania recently required all teachers to complete three credits of coursework that addresses the needs of ELLs. While these requirements are a step in the right direction, they certainly do not provide all that a teacher needs to know about how to serve ELLs. Unfortunately, the majority of the states have less explicit requirements for teacher preparation relevant to ELLs.

If we hope to see improvements in ELL achievement outcomes, greater continuity in how general education teachers are prepared by teacher-education programs, certified by states, and evaluated by local education agencies, or LEAs, is essential. By making sure that the special needs of ELLs are addressed at multiple stages of the teacher-preparation process, schools may gain higher quality teachers of ELLs and more importantly, higher outcomes for ELLs.

What ELLs Need

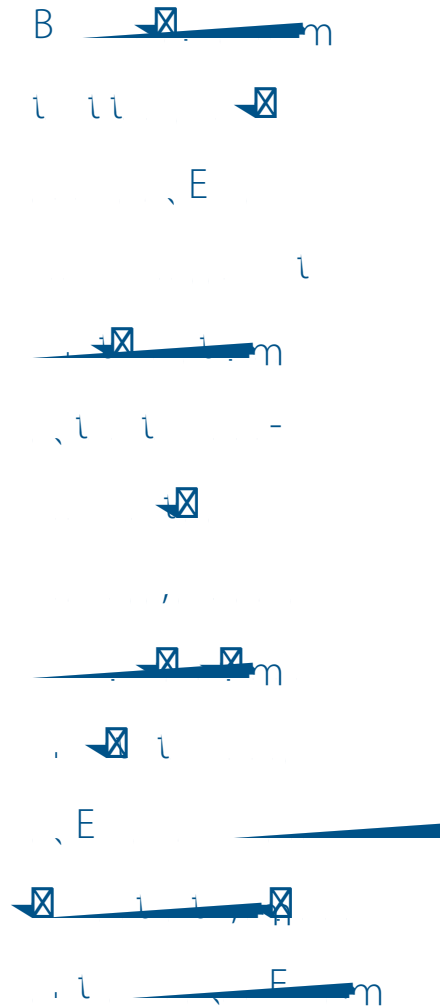
Recently, consensus has coalesced on some key research findings for teaching ELLs, including the need to emphasize the development of oral language skills and the need to focus on academic language and culturally inclusive practices.¹³ Unfortunately, this knowledge is often minimally reflected in the requirements of teacher education programs, in state certification exams, or in school based teacher evaluations. Let's look at each in turn.

Academic Language Development for ELLs

Oral language development

Teachers must have a working knowledge and understanding of language as a system and of the role of the components of language and speech, specifically sounds, grammar, meaning, coherence, communicative strategies, and social conventions. Teachers must be able to draw explicit attention to the type of language and its use in classroom settings, which is essential to first and second language learning.¹⁴

The recognition of language variation and dialectal differences and how these relate to learning is also necessary.



Teachers also must be aware of the core similarities and differences between first and second language development and know common patterns and milestones of second language acquisition in order to choose materials and activities that promote development.¹⁵ This includes recognizing the important role that oral language development can play in the development of literacy and academic competences.¹⁶ English language learners must develop oral language competences to be able to better communicate their ideas, ask questions, listen effectively, interact with peers and teachers, and become more successful learners. Teachers also need to have a sense of what signs to look for when ELL students struggle with language learning and communication, in addition to knowing how to assess or refer struggling students to the appropriate specialist.



- Oral language proficiency allows students to participate in academic discussions, understand instruction, and build literacy skills.
- Students with more developed first language skills are able better able to develop their second language skills.
- Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in oral language proficiency. ELLs require direct teaching of new words along with

t

English Language Learners

ELL

A number of checkpoints are encountered en route to becoming a teacher, including education coursework, student teaching, passing state teacher examinations, induction period once hired by a district, and on-the-job performance evaluations. These checkpoints can be seen as opportunities for ensuring that teachers meet certain standards that prepare them for working effectively with students with diverse language and learning needs.

Unfortunately, under current practices the knowledge and skills that teachers are expected to demonstrate mastery of at each of these checkpoints rarely correlate from one to another and frequently do not address the needs of English language learners. New York, for example, requires that teachers take six units of coursework on general language acquisition and literacy development but these courses may not specifically address the unique needs of ELLs.²³ Typically, the required sequence for initial certification will include courses J T*(w) 6(oha) 13(t)-5(ion w)-24(i) 6b 3-5(ion w)-24(i) 6b 3-5(u) oe75
5n wn, pasg statr exami... tions J T*(w) 10(as) dre teachewledge a-ml the requirm(tude) 5(n) 5related twledgcha(ly a(o deic8(al l) 3(a) 5(n) 9
ml thf(al ln2(ly a) (ion w) 3(t)-5(on 6(ork)-2(n) 5tly d(w)-15(le) 6(d) 5(g) 11(e a) 5) 4(he r) 13(e) 6(quir) 15(m(tude) 5(n).

S

TABLE 2

Evidence of oral language, academic language, and culture/diversity for English language learners as mentioned in state teacher-certification examinations and subtests for California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas

State exam	California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET)	Florida Teacher Certification Examination (FTCE)	Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)	New York State Teacher Certification Exam (NYSTCE)	The Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES)
Subtest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Mathematics Social Sciences Science Visual/performing arts Health Physical education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language arts and reading Mathematics Social Science Science and Technology Music, visual arts, physical education, and health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language arts Mathematics History/Social science Science Integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written analysis and expression Science/math/tech History Art Communication and research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English language arts/reading Mathematics Social studies Science Fine arts, health, and physical education
Oral language	***	*	**	***	***
Academic(9n)6(thema)6(tics)]TJ /**					

with some being rather general (California, New York) while others were more detailed and comprehensive (Florida, Massachusetts, Texas) and included supporting materials. The more comprehensive teacher evaluation rubrics share specific references to the needs of ELLs. Coincidentally, fourth-grade ELL students in Florida, Massachusetts, and Texas did better on the NAEP than their peers in California and New York. School districts that clearly articulate expectations for teachers may as a result foster specific teaching practices and behaviors that lead to improved outcomes for students.

TABLE 3
Evidence of content on oral language, academic language, and culture/diversity as mentioned on teacher-observation rubric dimensions for five large metropolitan areas

Providing all students with the opportunity to learn

Given the increased diversity of students in most U.S. schools and the high-proportion of English language learners accounting for the majority of K-12 enroll-

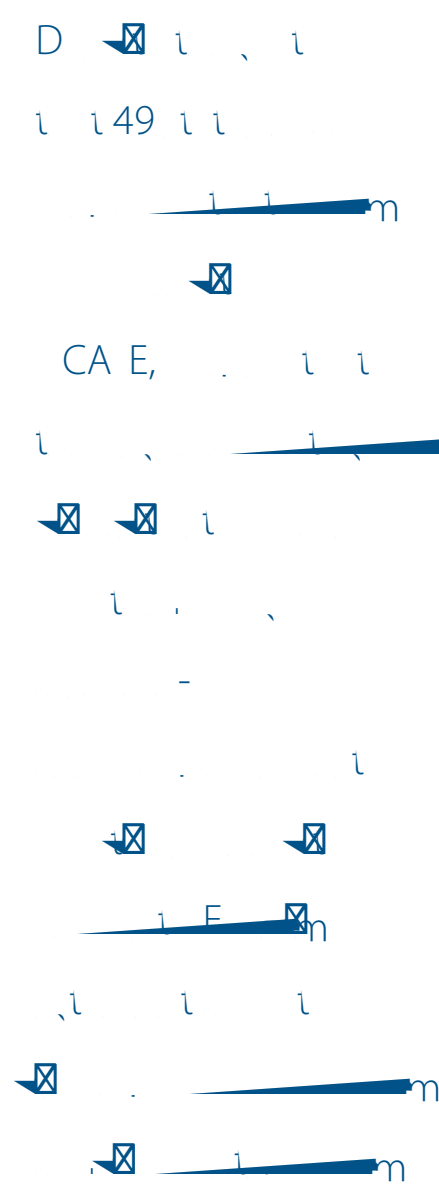
extent of that preparation.”³⁴ Despite the fact that 49 states have programs that are accredited by NCATE, we find that the enforcement of diversity standards and the use of research-based knowledge on best practices when it comes to ELLs is often not reflected in program requirements. As a consequence, preparing all teachers to work effectively with ELLs is lacking in many teacher-preparation programs.

Currently, NCATE is in the process of merging with the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, or TEAC, to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, or CAEP. This merger presents a unique opportunity for educational leaders to be proactive in shaping the knowledge and skills that teachers ought to have in order to make a difference for ELLs. As part of that effort, the soon-to-be-formed CAEP should insist that teacher-education programs prepare teachers for working with ELLs in order to gain accreditation.

A second method for increasing the focus on English language learners in teacher preparation is through implementation of legislation at both the federal and state level. Recent federal standard-based reform movements that have emerged in anticipation of the reauthorization of ESEA and some of the proposed changes potentially have a significant impact on the education of ELLs. The original accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind brought the achievement gaps that exist between ELLs and non-ELLs into sharp focus because schools were required to report on the progress of ELLs, particularly on standardized tests, at a level of specificity that was not previously required. As a result of this accountability, school administrators and teachers were forced to attend to the needs of ELLs. Prior to NCLB, students at the fringes, including ELLs and students with disabilities, were not counted in the evaluation of schools and teachers.

The context changed dramatically after 2001 and now all schools are focused on the achievement scores of all students. While the reauthorization of the law is still in question, there has been a recent development that causes concern—the introduction of waivers that allows states to bypass some of the key requirements of NCLB. There are both pros and cons associated with differentiated accountability that is offered through waivers, yet it is still vitally important that the specific needs of ELLs are carefully considered. Specifically, it is important to consider how teachers (general, ESL, content, elementary/secondary) are evaluated with respect to the language and content knowledge growth of ELLs.³⁵

State initiatives have also had a significant impact regarding the education of ELLs. In California, for example, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, or CTC, is the government agency that awards certification to graduates of programs



that meet the standards for educator preparation. Citing California Assembly Bill 537, Chapter 587 which relates to discrimination—the Commission of Teacher Credentialing requires that teacher-education programs ensure that teacher candidates be prepared to demonstrate the ability to teach and engage all types of learners. The commission also requires that teacher-preparation programs ensure that their graduates meet a specific standard on equity, diversity and access to the curriculum for all children.³⁶ This standard stipulates that all teachers know how to address the academic needs of all students from a variety of ethnic, racial cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, it requires that candidates:

...³⁷

Explicit recognition of the need to prepare teachers for working with English language learners in state-level policies is a step in the right direction, particularly if it includes a change to teacher-preparation programs to include specific content and experiences that ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to meet the needs of all students.

The final lever for institutionalizing change is through the courts. Historically, the courts have played a key role in the advocacy of educational rights and equity for ELLs. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruled that schools have a legal obligation to address both the language and curricular needs of ELLs. Later rulings mandated that the education of ELLs must be based on sound educational theory,³⁸ implemented adequately, and evaluated for its effectiveness. The U.S. Department of Justice³⁹ recently found that in Massachusetts, teachers of ELLs were not adequately trained to provide for their instructional needs, which was a violation of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act. As a result, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to mandate training and also specified the preparation that will be required of teachers of ELLs. Similar increases in training and program supports are currently being instituted in New York City schools as part of a state-mandated “Corrective Action Plan”⁴⁰ aimed at improving service areas for ELLs.

A 1990 class action suit filed in Florida on behalf of a group of minority rights advocacy groups significantly altered the quality of teacher preparation for

working with ELLs.⁴¹ The landmark case resulted in the Education of Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, Consent Decree and included stipulations related to assessment, program planning, and training of personnel who come in contact with ELLs. Beginning in 2003, these requirements applied to all school districts in the state of Florida and mandated that ESOL teachers take coursework in methods, curriculum/design, cross-cultural communication, applied linguistics, and testing and evaluation. In addition, all Florida teachers of the basic subjects are required to take 60 in-service points or the equivalent college credit of three semester hours in coursework related to the effective teaching of ELLs. Finally, teachers in other subject areas are required to participate in 18 in-service points or three semester hours on teaching ELLs. These more rigorous standards for teaching ELLs may be a contributing factor in the impressive academic gains that ELLs have made in Florida since 2003.

R

In order to make significant progress in improving the outcomes for ELLs, sweeping changes are needed in the way that teachers are prepared and supported to better serve this growing population. Given the current reform efforts in learning standards and teacher evaluations, a unique opportunity exists to get things right for all students, including ELLs whose subpar educational performance requires urgent attention. In our review of the research, we identified oral language development, academic language, and cultural diversity as critical bodies of knowledge and skill areas for all teachers of ELLs that were noticeably absent in the areas of policy and practice. By addressing the lack of accountability and alignment among teacher-education programs, state certification offices, and local school districts in terms of what knowledge and skills teachers must possess relative to ELLs, there is potential for improving student outcomes. In our analysis of existing policies for accreditation standards, state requirements for certification, and teacher-observation rubrics, we found limited references to the specific needs of ELLs, which may be a reflection of the systemic inadequacies that lead to insufficient teacher preparation.

Certainly, the stark contrast between ELL student performance in Florida versus all other states is important to investigate empirically. Future research on whether there is a correlation between detailed formative evaluation rubrics (as provided in Florida) and student outcomes would be worthwhile. It seems reasonable that when teachers receive clearly articulated, consistent expectations on how best to work with ELLs as part of their preparation, certification, and evaluation, the outcomes for their ELL students will reflect this increased emphasis. To be sure, there is significant room for improvement in how teacher-education programs prepare teachers for working with ELLs and one possible solution is for teacher-education programs to become more closely aligned with the school districts that hire their graduates.

When teachers have a large proportion of English language learners in their classroom, which is likely the case in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, Boston, and Miami, the question becomes: Are these teachers capable of providing the

necessary support to their students to ensure that they reach the required grade-level achievement standards?

It is a question that largely remains unanswered, but one that nonetheless requires closer examination, particularly when it comes to determining if teacher-preparation programs and state certification agencies are sufficiently aligned with what teachers ought to know to improve outcomes for ELLs.

In light of our findings we recommend that consistent, specific guidelines on the oral language, academic language, and cultural needs of ELLs be addressed in:

- Reauthorization of ESEA
- Revisions to NCATE standards
- State regulations
- Teacher-preparation programs
- State certification exams
- Teacher-observation rubrics
- Professional development linked to teacher evaluation

As discussed earlier, the involvement of the courts is a catalyst for change that has led to important educational policy in the past. This type of action, however, requires constituents who feel sufficiently empowered and confident about their right to seek change on behalf of their children. Because the parents of ELLs are often immigrants who are socially, economically, and politically vulnerable, it is unlikely they would initiate legal action involving the courts. Therefore, if we wish to see change in teacher-preparation programs, guidance at the federal level is essential as is the involvement of accrediting bodies and state agencies.

Again we cannot stress enough the

Finally, school district policy can include a section on teacher-observation rubrics that requires teachers to demonstrate how they are meeting the language and learning needs of ELLs in their classrooms. This information can in turn be used to support professional development aligned with teacher needs.

The recommendations outlined above are by no means meant to be comprehensive, but rather a starting point of the knowledge content and skills that teachers ought to possess in order to be better prepared to work with ELLs. Indeed these are areas that fall under the expertise of ESL and bilingual teachers who can serve as collaborators in helping general education teachers meet their students' needs. Still we believe strongly that all teachers would benefit from a more detailed understanding of the assessment, curricula, and instructional methods that would meet the unique needs of ELLs. We argue here that teacher preparation and development should require some basic knowledge relevant to ELLs for all teachers as a first step in helping ELLs to realize greater academic gains.

E

1 M. Mather, "Reports on America: Children in Immigrant Families Chart New Path" (Washington: Population Reference Bureau, 2009), available at <http://www.prb.org/pdf09/immigrantchildren.pdf>.

2 K. Tolson, "The 2008-2009 Annual Report of the U.S. Sentencing Commission," 427 F.3d 1131, 1132 (D.C. 2007).

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”