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As the director for Secondary Initiatives at E.L. Achieve, Ellen Levy works with middle and high school educators to meet the diverse needs of English learners. Ellen has served as a county-level program administrator, secondary director for the California Reading and Literature Project, and manager of an educational partnership grants program.

DWM: What are some of the challenges facing adolescent English learners?

SD and EL: Adolescent English learners face daunting challenges. They must develop a skillful command of English as they navigate the complexities of secondary schools, learn grade-level subject matter, and compete with their native-speaking peers. Many English learners reach the secondary level making good or adequate academic progress; however, a significant number are long-term—or protracted—English learners.

Many have achieved adequate fluency in everyday language, yet they struggle with advanced reading and writing, lack depth of vocabulary and syntactical knowledge, and are not yet equipped with sufficient English knowledge for academic tasks requiring complex inferences, analyses, hypotheses, and summaries. This lack of language proficiency and academic achievement can mask students’ potential to learn.

Academic achievement requires having the language tools to fully participate in aspects of classroom life, such as listening with comprehension, speaking about ideas and concepts with accuracy and confidence, reading for varied purposes, and capably writing across a wide range of genres. Given that English learners have the same number of years as native-speakers to complete college-going coursework, they require an accelerated approach to instruction—one that emphasizes the complex language of abstract and higher order academic thinking.

DWM: What approach do you take in meeting the academic language needs of adolescents who are learning English?

SD and EL: Instructional strategies that tap prior knowledge, scaffold content instruction, and ensure student motivation—although critical—are not enough to
For example, in an English class, a learning goal might be “Students will identify a theme common to two works of literature and write an essay comparing the authors’ treatments of the shared theme.” When teachers know from the onset that students must have command of the functional language of compare and contrast to meet this goal, they can develop lessons that support students in learning and using the specific linguistic structures and forms of comparison.

We use a construction metaphor of bricks and mortar. In this metaphor, the bricks refer to the vocabulary specific to the topic at hand. The mortar refers to the functional language needed to connect the bricks and generate cohesive speech and print, the words and phrases in patterns used to propose a solution, make a prediction, or describe a character. Students must learn the meanings of the bricks, the topic-related vocabulary, and how to use the mortar to connect them. To compare two authors’ treatment of a shared theme, students must be able to draw on knowledge of comparison, using mortar phrases such as the following to construct competent responses:

- The similarities between (A) and (B) suggest…
- Although (A) and (B) have some similar characteristics, there are significant differences...
- A notable difference between…
- (A)… while (B)…

Intentional and purposeful teaching of language patterns—the mortar—enables English learners to express their thinking more adeptly.

DWM: What role does oral language play in developing academic skills? How does classroom practice support this?

SD and EL: Content instruction in secondary schools typically is very text-focused, providing scant opportunities for English learners to orally process new learning or develop ways to express their understanding. Often the only person in class using complex language is the teacher.

When opportunities for oral interaction arise, English learners are characteristically passive observers, even in ESL/ELD courses. When pressed, students’ utterances usually are limited to brief responses to teachers’ questions. Consequently, it is not uncommon
Before beginning to work with districts, we meet with the site and district leadership to map initial training, design ongoing support through a professional learning community, and plan for capacity building. When the district launches an initiative, we take a prominent role and engage participating teachers in a structured cycle of learning and reflection.

In the same way that we ask teachers to chunk learning into discrete, measurable tasks for students, we provide teachers with an incremental approach to changing their practice. After introducing teachers to the concept of functional language and the value of explicit instruction in discipline-specific language, we narrow our focus to specific skills that teachers can master one at a time rather than tackle everything at once.

As participating teachers refine their classroom practice and grow confident, and as administrators become familiar with how to support this vision of instruction, we pass the baton to them, supporting them in becoming leaders of the initiative. Ultimately, as the majority of the staff becomes involved, the initiative lives on through clear expectations and support, peer coaching, team teaching, and collaborative lesson planning.

DWM: What changes do you believe are most needed to best serve adolescent English learners in secondary schools?

SD and EL: Few secondary schools offer advanced ESL/ELD courses designed to teach the complex language structures essential to academic English. Few expect explicit language support to be included in all content coursework.

English learners do not develop ease and accuracy in language for academic tasks through passive listening or unstructured interactions. They develop fluency through frequent and structured interactive tasks with clear expectations to produce formal oral and written English. Middle and high school teachers do well to ensure that English learners have the language needed to process subject matter deeply and express what they know.

Oral language routines help students internalize the language patterns they need to accomplish learning goals. Providing plenty of structured opportunities for oral and written communication enables English learners to develop and express sophisticated thinking.

When facilitated by skilled practitioners, ordinary pair-share activities can become carefully orchestrated exercises in which partners hold each other responsible for the accurate production of complex terms and phrases. Imagine a high school biology teacher who, after 10 minutes of presentation, stops and provides students with two minutes to develop written responses to a prompt followed by two minutes to share their responses with partners. Now imagine this same process, but add explicit language instruction.

In this scenario, the biology teacher shows students how to use word banks and sentence frames when responding. The students now have access to content terms such as vacuole and membrane as well as functional phrases like serve the purpose of and operate as.

DWM: What have you found to be effective in promoting schoolwide changes in academic language development?

SD and EL: No matter how well received, the good ideas presented in formal professional development sessions often fail to take root and have lasting impacts. Deep and meaningful change takes planning and support at all levels of a system. Without ongoing guidance and reinforcement, teachers and administrators tend to lose sight of the implementation process and the next steps that are sensible.

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Too often, language instruction stops at the intermediate level, leaving English learners without guidance in navigating the complexities of advanced language. Consequently, many English learners have reached a plateau at the intermediate level of English proficiency and have not acquired—and are not learning—requisite language and content skills.

To best serve adolescent English learners, each middle and high school teacher shares in the responsibility to teach the language needed to meet content demands. Each teacher infuses purposeful language instruction that prioritizes explicit teaching of vocabulary, maintains a focus on the reading and writing
of expository texts, provides syntactical structures to meet learning goals, and builds in consistent, accountable opportunities for oral and written communication.

Schools provide appropriate courses for English development with a method for placing students based on identified needs. In brief, implementing a shared vision of high quality language instruction for all adolescent English learners is the most important step educators can take.

References


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