

Research Brief

Key Issues in Educational Practice for Addressing the Needs of ELLs

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It has now been over 40 years since Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act (as Title VII of ESEA), and more than 35 years since the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that local districts must specifically address the academic needs of students lacking English language proficiency (in *Lau v. Nichols*). We have been through the bilingual wars, standards-based reform, NCLB accountability, and now face issues contextualized by ESEA reauthorization, charter schools, a fresh round of Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reviews of districts, and the Common Core Standards. In all cases, we must ask what the key issues are that would promote greater access for English Language Learners to equitable instruction, both in developing English language proficiency and in developing academic content.

In the area of ELL policy and practice, we are fortunate to have at our disposal the framework set forth in the so-called “Castañeda standards,” based on the opinion in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision, *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981). In that decision, Judge Carolyn Randall made an important contribution to knowledge developing in our field by setting parameters for the meaning of “appropriate action” in the Equal Educational Opportunities Act. These standards have subsequently been enacted into policy by the Office for Civil Rights in its enforcement of *Lau*. The Castañeda standards state that appropriate actions are those that are 1) based on sound educational theory, 2) implemented with adequate resources, and 3) after a period of time can be shown to be effective in addressing the inequities ELL students face due to limited English proficiency. These standards are used by OCR in the review of districts and states, and assert a direct role for educational theory and evaluation in improving programs for ELLs. I will address what appear to me to be key questions necessary to improve our use of Castañeda, and ultimately the educational outcomes of ELL students, and point to important opportunities in the present policy environment.

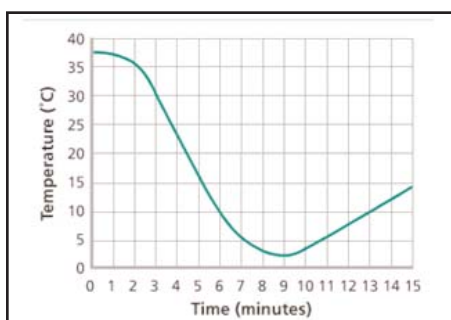
Reasonable Normative Expectations

Many policy initiatives have made reference to how long it should take for ELLs to reach a level of English language proficiency such that they no longer need special attention. Early in Title VII debates, there were proposals to limit the time to as brief as six months. Proposition 227 in California limited the expectation to one year. Arizona recently instituted a policy to provide a minimum of four hours of English language development instruction during the first year, with the view of “the more the better.” Current ESEA reauthorization discussions are framed around a time-course expectation for English language development as well. Data to shed light on this important question are quite sparse, but most systematic estimates put it at 4-7 years until most students are re-designated.

NCLB requirements for state English language proficiency assessments (aligned to content assessments) have created longitudinal data bases that can be mined to determine appropriate normative expectations for English proficiency. There is still considerable variability from state to state with respect to the standards on which the annual assessments are based, but the variability will be reduced with the implementation of the Common Core Standards and the requirement (at least in current NCLB) that the ELD assessments be aligned to content and performance standards in the content areas. There may also be more consistency in the definition of ELL for identification and reclassification purposes. The key issue as we move to the future is ensuring the improved use of these data to develop better normative expectations for the English proficiency development of ELLs, and creating systems to make the data readily available to teachers and school site instructional leaders.

Academic Language and Academic Language Growth

Recent interest in academic language has been reinforced by the Common Core Standards that specify reading and writing standards in content areas beyond English Language Arts, *i.e.*, in science and in history/social studies. For example, the Common Core Standards for Grade 9-10 under “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas” includes the following: “Translate quantitative or technical information expressed in words in a text into visual form (*e.g.*, a table or chart) and translate information expressed visually or mathematically (*e.g.*, in an equation) into words.” Instruction to meet such standards will clearly require the science teacher to understand and anticipate difficulties that ELLs might have in reading science text and visual representations, and to use those occasions to serve as an instructor of the language of science. For example, one question in a textbook on the energy in chemical changes asks of the graph: “At what temperature did the reaction stop? How can you tell?” The term “At what temperature” is a scientific text structure usually referring to a graphical representation, and paralleled by other quantitative markers such as “At what [blank]...” where [blank] may be any quantitative variable such as angle, degree, time, weight, etc. This is just a simple example of where a science teacher could teach specific cues in the language of science that lead to understanding of scientific communication.



The key issue is the complexity of academic language, which many teachers in the content areas just think of as their disciplinary vocabulary, such as the words found in the glossaries of textbooks. This view needs to be expanded. As Catherine Snow and others have pointed out, there are many academic words that transcend academic disciplines (*e.g.*, “analyze,” “infer,” “rational”), and furthermore, there are hallmark grammatical structures and functions that go well beyond vocabulary to which students must be exposed, and in many cases explicitly taught.

Aside from teachers becoming aware of characteristics of academic language, they will also need the tools to act as facilitators of its acquisition. There are a few technology-based tools that can help teachers support student exposure to academic texts – including my own creation, WordSift (<http://wordsift.com>) and a pilot product of ETS, Language Muse®.

English Language Proficiency and Academic Content Development

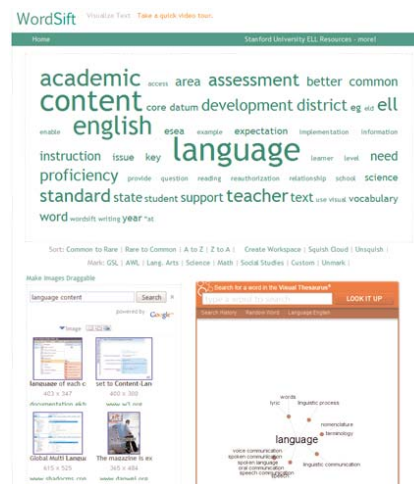
With the implementation of English Language Proficiency standards and assessments at all states and the requirement that they be aligned to the state content standards, data are now available that would enable cross-tabulations of performance in the content assessments with English language proficiency level. Hopefully the Common Core Standards will further create uniformity across states in the ELP assessments as well, and we will emerge with better systems through which to develop expected relationships between English language development and academic content development. I will show sample graphs of such relationships. Further understanding of these relationships will enable the use of data from ELP assessments as proxies (in some weighted formula) for content assessments, and will also enable a better understanding of when content assessments conducted in English will give useful and valid information for ELLs. A key issue for ESEA reauthorization is to enable the creation of better ELP assessments, and more importantly, to create ways of making use of information from ELP assessments in predicting and interpreting performance in content assessments.

What can the school and district leadership do to support effective instruction for ELLs? While it is important to have staff presence at sites with strong expertise in promoting English language development and enabling better content access for ELLs, it is equally important that all teachers see themselves as teachers of ELLs. To support this, provide professional development opportunities that engage all staff in the integration of ELD and content access, such as by systematically examining the text of content area readings across subject areas and analyzing its academic language characteristics, or examining the writing of students in the content areas and addressing how to support academic writing. Another possibility is to engage in the implementation of cross-subject area curricula such as Word Generation (<http://wordgeneration.org/>) that focuses on academic vocabulary building at the secondary level.

Districts can help facilitate a focus on academic language through the development of protocols for lesson planning or for instructional observations that include key elements of ELD and content instruction. For example, San Francisco Unified School District has developed a protocol “Planning for English Learners to access standards-based content and produce language” in order for district coaches to work with content teachers at the secondary level. It is unfortunately a common case for the ELL administrator for the district to be in the role of compliance monitoring and reporting for the state and federal categorical programs, rather than being engaged in the support of instruction, but these role expectations would need to be changed by the district leadership.

Induction support for new teachers is also typically under the control of the district, and offers an opportunity for coaching and mentoring that supports effective instruction for ELLs. Typically, new teachers have had little or no exposure to these issues, so they would need to be brought up to speed on ELD strategies and supporting content instruction for ELLs. This also means that the mentor teacher providing induction support would themselves need to understand ELL strategies.

As mentioned earlier, technology provides a vast potential resource for supporting ELLs, especially for exploring properties of text and for more advanced applications such as evaluating the content of student writing (e.g., Write to Learn - <http://www.writetolearn.net/>). In this case, I will be selfish and promote my own website, WordSift (<http://wordsift.com>) that helps analyze the vocabulary content of text and links them to various visual resources. WordSift creates a “tag cloud” representing the most frequent words found in any entered text, marks and sorts different words (including academic vocabulary and content-specific vocabulary), and provides various visual displays of words that can be selected from the tag cloud. I entered the text of the present paper, and obtained the following visual representation:



This tool enables students and teachers to preview text, anticipate challenging words, and enables a motivating and playful exploration of the contents of the text. It is an appropriate role for the district to provide the technology necessary to put such tools into the hands of ELLs and their teachers, and to provide professional development support so that they can be effectively used.

Regarding assessment, at a minimum, the district must help school sites look at the annual accountability assessments in ELD and academic content areas available to sites in a manner most likely to have instructional impact. They should also help sites understand longitudinal aspects of the data, such as in helping to define and identify in instructionally meaningful ways the “long-term ELs” who have been stuck at the intermediate level of proficiency for many years, and to appreciate the consequences of this. The district can also provide access to appropriate benchmark or formative site-level assessments.

Conclusion

Educational reform is a bit like surfing, in that one looks for the timing of waves that give the opportunity for a good ride. The waves that exist in the current policy environment include the Common Core Standards, ESEA (NCLB) reauthorization, improved data systems particularly catalyzed by Race to the Top, and a revitalization of the Castañeda standards by the Office for Civil Rights. Recent retrospective research by the Council of Great City Schools of four urban districts that showed better-than-average progress for ELLs suggested that these were districts that took advantage of policy opportunities to bring coherence to their ELL programming.

The Common Core Standards and ESEA combined bring the opportunity to align English language proficiency with academic content, in particular to bring literacy in the content areas into the domain of English language development. Accountability provisions of NCLB further provide increased attention to ELL performance, although in a very imperfect way. If ESEA reauthorization results in appropriate fixes to the problems (including accommodation practices in assessment, expectations about adequate yearly progress, and inclusion of reclassified ELLs in the ELL subgroup), then improved data systems that tell a longitudinal story will also provide an important opportunity for ELLs. These opportunities, combined with appropriate expectations for how long it takes students to attain proficiency in English language development and the expected correlations of language development with content development, should enable an appropriate setting of outcomes for the “sound educational theory” set forth in Castañeda.

About Kenji Hakuta

Kenji Hakuta is Lee J. Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University, where he taught graduate students and ELL teacher credential candidates since 1989, except for three years when he served as Founding Dean of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts at the new University of California–Merced.

Active in education policy, Dr. Hakuta has testified before Congress and other public bodies on language policy, the education of language minority students, affirmative action in higher education, and improvement of quality in educational research.

For the past three years, he has worked with San Francisco Unified School District middle-school science teachers through the Strategic Education Research Partnership to improve access to science texts for English Language Learners.

Dr. Hakuta founded and co-directs Stanford’s on-line CLAD/CTEL certification program, which has provided over 2,000 California teachers with their ELL certification. He created “WordSift,” a free on-line resource in support of students and teachers in the visualization of textual and academic vocabulary.

Dr. Hakuta earned his Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology from Harvard and began his career as a developmental psychologist at Yale. He is an elected Member of the National Academy of Education, a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association, and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is the author of many research papers and books, including *Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism*.

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