

# Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches

## Excerpt from Chapter 1: Research to Guide English Language Development Instruction (pp. 59-64)

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### Summary

In this final section, we attempt to offer a synthesis of the research summarized in the chapter. Our goal is to provide a set of implications for practice and policy that are as clear as possible, given the tenuous nature of many of the findings. (See the tables at the end of this chapter.)

Our review of the research suggests there is good evidence for the following guidelines:

1. Providing ELD instruction is better than not providing it.
2. ELD instruction should include interactive activities, but they must be carefully planned and carried out.

Both guidelines are quite reliable because they are based on a number of studies, many of them experiments, that converge on those findings. Both guidelines also have adequate support from studies conducted with English learners in the U.S. and from studies that use measures of language proficiency. The research supporting Guideline 2 provides direction about the design of effective interactive activities, including the nature and structure of interactive tasks, the level of proficiency of the English learners, and the various ways in which they might be paired together during interactive tasks.

We consider the following guidelines to be hypotheses. That is, there are insufficient studies to constitute strong, reliable findings, and the studies that do exist have been conducted with only a small portion of the U.S. English learner population, thus limiting their generalizability. Although enough evidence exists to consider these “best guesses” at the moment, future research might well cause us to revise these guidelines:

3. A separate block of time should be devoted daily to ELD instruction.
4. ELD instruction should emphasize listening and speaking although it can incorporate reading and writing.\*
5. ELD instruction should explicitly teach elements of English (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, grammar, functions, and conventions).
6. ELD instruction should integrate meaning and communication to support explicit teaching of language.
7. ELD instruction should provide students with corrective feedback on form.

8. Use of English should be maximized during ELD instruction; primary language should be used strategically.
9. Teachers should attend to communication and language-learning strategies and incorporate them into ELD instruction.
10. ELD instruction should emphasize academic language as well as conversational language.\*
11. ELD instruction should continue at least until students reach level 4 (early advanced) and possibly through level 5 (advanced).\*

Of these eight guidelines, the strongest hypotheses (indicated by \*) are Guidelines 4 (ELD instruction should emphasize listening and speaking), 10 (ELD instruction should emphasize academic language as well as conversational language), and 11 (ELD instruction should continue at least until students reach level 4 [early advanced] and possibly through level 5 [advanced]). However, with the exception of O'Brien (2007) and Saunders, Foorman, and Carlson (2006) for Guideline 3, there are no experimental or quasi-experimental studies (comparing specific instructional approaches) supporting any of these hypotheses, so they have not been tested directly. The studies that exist provide circumstantial evidence suggesting differences in student language development as a result of different types of instruction, but the evidence is not as strong as it is in the first group of practice guidelines. In addition, although all the studies for Guidelines 4, 10, and 11 focus on U.S. English learners, most focus on the elementary and not on the secondary grade levels. The studies do have good outcome relevance, however, since they use measures of English language proficiency rather than narrow tests of specific language forms or functions.

Guideline 5 (ELD instruction should explicitly teach elements of English [e.g., vocabulary, syntax, grammar, functions, and conventions]) has a strong supportive body of evidence, but few of the studies were conducted with U.S. English learners in K–12 or use outcome measures that are good gauges of language proficiency; instead, most use narrow assessments that measure specific language features, such as word order, verb conjugation, relative clauses, complements, and question forms. Nonetheless, we still believe that Guideline 5 is probably valid for English learners in the U.S. There is considerable evidence from literacy instruction that teaching specific components of literacy makes a contribution to literacy development (see August and Shanahan, this publication). Although there are limits to the analogy between literacy development and oral language development, it is plausible that both respond to comparable instructional approaches. The study by O'Brien (2007) with California first-graders suggested that an ELD program that included teaching elements of English grammar and functions produced more growth in language development than approaches that did not.

Guideline 6 brings together critical elements that are debatable: explicit instruction of language forms and the role of meaning, communication, and authentic and functional language use in the service of language learning. The truth is that there is no definitive empirical answer about the appropriate balance and exact relationships among these elements. Recall Ellis's statement cited near the beginning of this chapter: ". . . research and theory do not afford a uniform account of how instruction can best facilitate language learning." We know, empirically, that it is probably detrimental to language learning to leave explicit instruction out of the equation, but how -- in an ELD instructional context -- meaning and authentic and functional use complement explicit instruction is just not known at this time.

We concluded, based on our review of the literature, that all those elements are important for ELD instruction. The major challenge for instructional design and subsequent research is determining the right balance among these elements. With such subsequent work in mind, we would add one other observation. The construct of “meaning” can and should remain a central topic in subsequent research. Most first- and second language acquisition theories posit a role for meaning-making in the acquisition process. Ellis (2005b) further specifies “pragmatic meaning,” where language is used for communication rather than being the target of study, as particularly critical. Our review of current research, however, suggests that meaning – as an element of an instructional approach or intervention -- is typically not sufficiently defined to study and understand its nature and/or contribution to language acquisition and learning.

The other four guidelines in this group -- 3 (A separate block of time should be devoted daily to ELD instruction), 7 (ELD instruction should provide students with corrective feedback on form), 8 (Use of English should be maximized during ELD instruction), and 9 (Teachers should attend to communication and language-learning strategies and incorporate them in ELD instruction) -- either have very few studies and/or have examined only a tiny fraction of the K–12 English learner population. There is compelling evidence for Guideline 7 insofar as the effects of corrective feedback (either implicit or explicit) have been successfully replicated in both classroom and laboratory contexts but not with U.S. English learner populations. In the case of Guidelines 8 and 9, only one study supporting each guideline actually used measures of student English-language proficiency as an outcome variable; thus we know very little about the effect of maximizing English use during ELD instruction (Guideline 8) or incorporating communication and language-learning strategies (Guideline 9) on students’ English language development. Guideline 3 (A separate block of time should be devoted daily to ELD instruction) had the most valid outcome measures, but there are only two studies, and they were conducted with kindergarten and grade one students.

Our third category of guidelines draws from the broader educational literature, not from research on English learners per se:

12. ELD instruction should be planned and delivered with specific language objectives in mind.
13. English learners should be carefully grouped by language proficiency for ELD instruction; for other portions of the school day they should be in mixed classrooms and not in classrooms segregated by language proficiency.
14. The likelihood of establishing and/or sustaining an effective ELD instructional program increases when schools and districts make it a priority.

These guidelines are not definitive in the context of ELD instruction for English learners, but they are generally accepted as meaningful and reliable within education research more broadly defined. The issue for ELD instruction is generalizability. Do these guidelines apply to schools and classroom contexts serving English learner populations and specifically with regard to ELD instruction? This is clearly an empirical question, although our experience leads us to believe they do. Although we have not tested these specific guidelines in our own English learner and school improvement studies, they are consistent with what we have observed in our work trying to help schools with large numbers of English learners become more effective schools.

Clearly, much work remains to be done to develop an empirical research base on which to build effective ELD instructional programs. As we said at the beginning of the chapter, however, many

sources and resources might guide the direction of ELD instruction, including theory, research, ELD standards, practitioner experience, and published programs. Our experience in schools throughout California suggests attention to ELD instruction is growing, and important efforts are underway to develop effective ELD programs for both elementary and secondary school students. Attention to the matter of academic language proficiency is also growing. It is imperative to complement those efforts and interest with careful research and evaluation. We are encouraged by efforts such as those by Tong and others (2008) that bring together a number of elements and guidelines discussed here. Clearly no single practice or principle will be sufficient to help English learners gain access to high-level, mainstream academic curriculum. Instead, we must not only test individual components and guidelines; we must also construct comprehensive ELD programs and test the proposition that they help students acquire high levels of English language proficiency as rapidly as possible and regardless of whether they are in bilingual or in English-only programs. From our experience, strong opinion too often trumps careful weighing of evidence in this highly volatile and politically charged field.

Current accountability practices shine a bright spotlight on academic progress -- or lack of progress -- among English learners. Accountability may be a good thing for schools and English learners, or it may be problematic. It may produce a strong and long-term commitment toward building effective programs for English learners; or it might result in a frenzied search for the next “quick fix.” The major theme of this entire volume is that success for English learners likely requires comprehensive programs and approaches that incorporate ELD instruction, strong English literacy instruction, effective sheltered instruction in the content areas, and -- ideally -- effective use of students’ primary language. We have a lot to learn about what constitutes effective ELD instruction. Nothing in this chapter or this publication suggests there are quick fixes waiting around the corner for schools and districts trying to meet next year’s accountability criteria. For ELD instruction in particular and educating English learners in general, success is going to require a sustained effort informed by attention to both evidence and thoughtful practice.

Source: Saunders, William, and Goldenberg, C. Research to Guide English Language Instruction. IN Improving Education for English Learners: Research Based Approaches. California Department of Education: Sacramento, 2010, pp. 21-81.

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