



Comprehensive Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners

By Laurie Olsen, PhD



Teaching children to read and write – to become literate – is a major task of primary and elementary schooling.

This paper describes a comprehensive, integrated, multidimensional and scientifically based approach to literacy instruction that draws from the research literature on English learners, dual language development, and second language pedagogy. The approach integrates the four domains of language (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and connects literacy development to language development overall and to content knowledge. Literacy (reading and writing) develops within a larger frame of language. It builds the capacity to engage with and use language (productive and receptive) for learning, interaction, discourse, voice and expression, as well as for social and academic purposes in and for all of a child's linguistic and cultural worlds.

For English language learners/Emergent Bilinguals, language and literacy education occur within the context of the **presence and development of two (or more) languages**. The cross-language implications, the available linguistic resources to draw upon, and the potential of proficient bilingualism and biliteracy have to be addressed and incorporated as essential defining elements of an effective model of literacy instruction for these students. Therefore, effective literacy development for ELs embraces a second language development pedagogy, and recognizes their dual language brains and identities through affirmation and activation of the home language and building of cross-language connections. In these ways, it is different than literacy development for monolingual English speakers. ELLs need the invitation and support to leverage and develop the resource of their home language, and require supports for overcoming the challenges of learning English and the potential barriers to participation, comprehension, and engagement they face as second language learners.



Components of a Comprehensive Literacy Approach for ELLs

A *comprehensive* approach to literacy instruction involves 24 elements in four categories. The first category includes the six **precursors to literacy** important to establish among young children (preschool/TK age). The second category includes twelve **essential elements of literacy instruction**. The third category attends to the six **essential contexts of literacy development** that facilitate and enhance literacy development: the location of literacy development within content learning in integrated thematic units, the creation of a language-rich and print-immersive learning environments, the use of high quality and culturally inclusive materials, safe and assets-based relationships, and support for the development of home language and bilingualism. And the fourth category speaks to additional elements of **literacy development specifically for bilingual and dual language program contexts** where the goal is biliteracy and the uses of literacy for academic study in two languages.

In a comprehensive approach, all of these components are important. Each supports the others. No component alone constitutes a reasonable reading or literacy approach. Altogether, it is the *integration* of all of the elements, the coherence and *alignment* of the approach over years, and the *responsiveness* of instruction to student need that add up to effectiveness for English learners.

PRECURSOR Skills and Conditions

(For 3 - 5 year olds, in both home language and English)

- Oral language and vocabulary development
- Print access and active engagement with books and text
- Early concepts of print and purposes of print (written and read)
- Phonological awareness
- Memory and visual recall
- Early attentiveness to print, beginning letter knowledge

Essential ELEMENTS of Literacy Instruction (K+)

Foundational Skills

- Phonemic Awareness
- Letter knowledge and alphabet
- Phonics and Decoding (word recognition)
- Concepts of print
- Fluency

Essential Literacy Components

- Oral language development
- Vocabulary (and background knowledge) across content areas
- Comprehension and meaning-making
- Cross language connections & Metalinguistic Development
- Writing
- Print immersion/access and Active Engagement with Text
- English language development (ESL/ELD): How English works (for ELs)

Essential CONTEXTS for Effective Literacy Development

- Integrated Content knowledge and Language/Literacy through thematic instruction
- Language-rich, print-immersive and content-rich learning environment
- High quality and culturally inclusive relevant materials
- Safe and affirming assets-based relationships and classroom/school cultures
- Embrace of home language and affirmation of bilingualism (for ELs)
- Differentiated instruction based on formative assessments

In a DUAL LANGUAGE/BILITERACY PROGRAM Context

- Explicit goal of biliteracy
- Native language foundational skills
- Strategic and aligned literacy instruction across two languages
- Cross-language, transfer, metalinguistic skills
- Dual language assessments
- Use of literacy for and in academic study in both languages

While the components of a comprehensive literacy approach are inter-related, they each have a specific role to play in the development of strong literacy. Because of the integrated nature of an effective approach to literacy education for English Learners, being sure all essential elements are appropriately present and implemented is important. Currently there is significant attention to the particular element of phonics/decoding and foundational skills. Educators need to be equally vigilant about other elements as well, or the literacy development of English learners will be compromised. Understanding the importance of each element, and what to look for as evidence that it is being addressed is a key role for school leaders.

Chart: What should I see in a classroom, and why is it important?

Component	If it is not present...	Notes re: ELLs	Examples of what to look for
Oral Language	Without development of oral language that is the foundation for internalizing a language, ELLs will struggle to isolate and hear the sounds of the language needed to decode text, are challenged in recognizing vocabulary in print, and have more difficulty following the flow and structure and meaning of text.	Building oral language is both an ESL/ELD second language issue, and a matter of building opportunities and structures for student talk/discourse into all curriculum for all students. It is how ELLs internalize the sounds, structures and vocabulary in English.	Degree of student talk - more student talk than teacher talk. Structured & scaffolded opportunities for student talk – with particular support for ELs (e.g., sentence starters, modeling, T-P-S).
Phonemic Awareness	Because reading involves decoding text sound by sound, the ability to hone in on hearing the phonemes of language is a basic foundational skill. Without the practice and skill of focusing on phonemes, the act of decoding is more difficult.	For ELLs, this is both a transferable awareness (applies across languages) that speech is comprised of sound parts, and it also involves recognizing the language-specific sounds of each language.	Rhymes, repetitive phrases. playing with sound of words, read-alouds, stretching out sounds, rhythm and clapping out syllables, breaking apart words, segmentation and blending of syllables.
Concepts of Print	Concepts of print (e.g., directionality, sweep, structure of books of various genres, the alphabetic principle, how books work, etc.) is necessary or students are unable to approach moving through text. Concepts of print also includes PURPOSES of print.	Some concepts of print work differently in different languages (e.g., directionality).	Teacher modeling (e.g., finger underlining words as they read) and narration during read-alouds (e.g., pointing out the cover, remarking on turning the page, etc.). Collaborative shared writing.
Phonics, Decoding, Fluency	Without these basic mechanics of reading, students are unable to make their way through text by piecing together the sounds represented by letters into words, then sentences with meaning.	There is variability in how much direct instruction in phonics students need. Predictability and transfer of letter sounds is variable across languages (e.g., some letters represent different sounds in different languages). Explicit cross-language attention is needed for ELLs. Where possible, these mechanics should be taught in child's strongest language.	Systematic instruction in phonics and decoding should be taking place in Kindergarten and first grade. Differentiation in how much and how long is important – so look for targeted small groups. Partner reading, choral reading, echo reading.



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Vocabulary Development & Background Knowledge	Without vocabulary development and background knowledge, the words decoded on the page have no meaning. This is a primary determinant of reading comprehension.	For ELLs, extensive and varied vocabulary needs to be taught and integrated throughout the curriculum along with the building of background knowledge.	Texts with content related to what is being learned throughout the curriculum; thematic instruction Explicit vocabulary teaching. Manipulatives, visuals that provide context for language and literacy. Home language resources related to content.
Comprehension and Meaning Making Skills	Comprehension is the goal of reading. While background knowledge and vocabulary are key components of comprehension, it also requires a set of skills that good readers utilize as they make their way through text. Without these skills, it is difficult for students to retain information they have already read and put it together to make overall meaning of what a text is expressing. As students increasingly are expected to engage with longer texts and to use reading to learn content, these comprehension and meaning making skills are essential.	Comprehension and meaning making <i>skills</i> transfer across languages, but vocabulary and language structures do not. Explicit teaching about how English works and how it is structured in text is essential for ELLs. <i>Common red flag:</i> ELLs can decode (sound out) words in text but cannot tell you what they mean.	Teacher modeling and explicit teaching of comprehension skills (e.g., summarizing, predicting, questioning, self-text connections – what good readers do). Student discussion about what they are reading – with scaffolds for EL participation. ESL/ELD that focuses on structural and textual features of English.
English Language Development/ English as a Second Language (ELD/ ESL)	Without designated ESL/ELD that provides focus on how English works and practice for second language learners, most aspects of learning to read in English become challenging. It is a struggle to hear and isolate the sounds/ phonemes of English, a challenge to understand the syntax and structure of English text, and difficult to comprehend and make meaning of vocabulary in a language they haven't learned. Designated ESL/ELD should prepare for and respond to the linguistic demands ELs are facing in academic and literacy tasks throughout curriculum.	ELD/ESL is essential as second language development for English learners, and is legally required.	Designated ELD/ESL time is scheduled and delivered daily, and curriculum is targeted for the language proficiency level of the English learner. It is based on ELD/ ESL standards, and addresses the linguistic demands students at that grade level are facing throughout the curriculum.

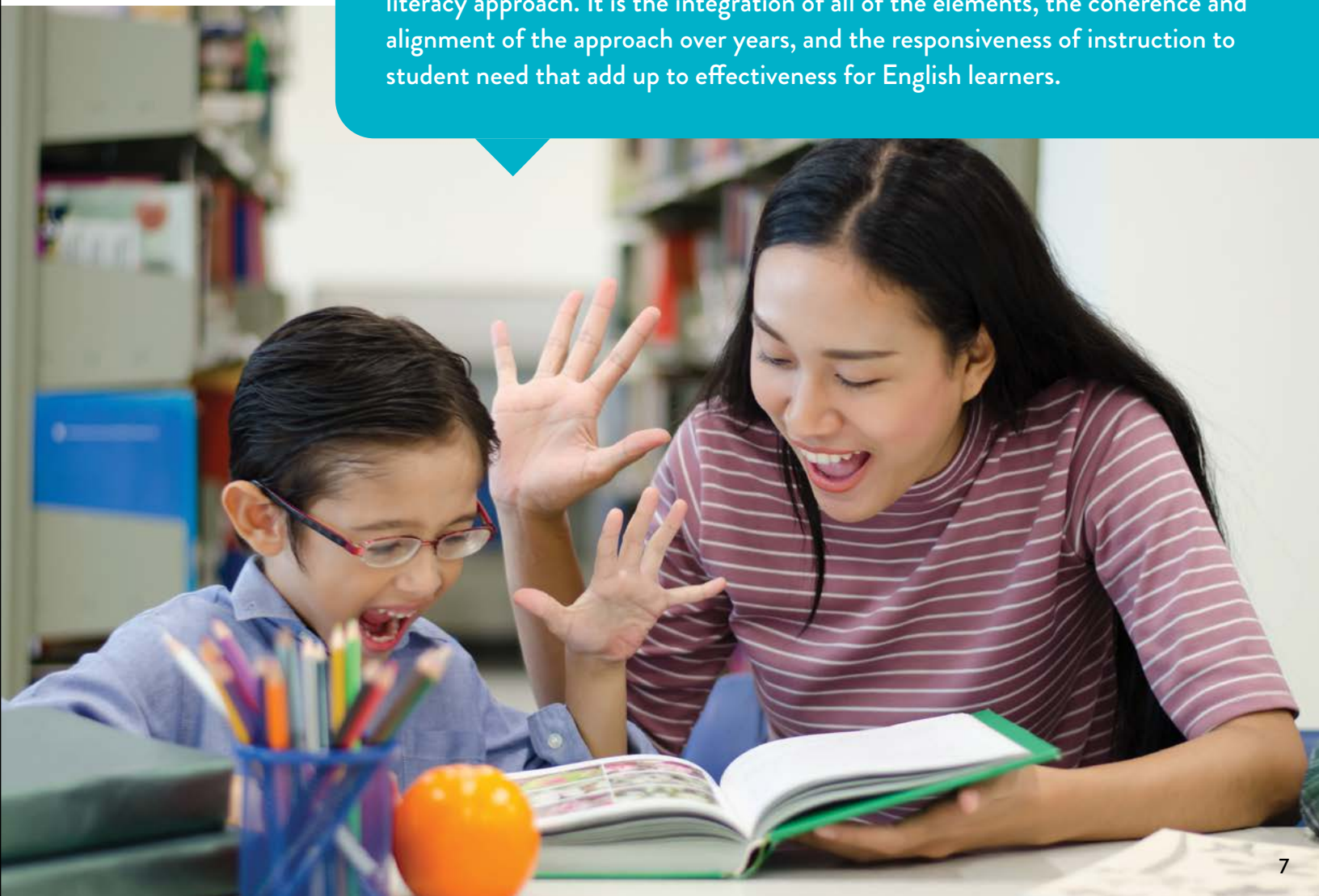
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Cross Language Connections	English learners already have a language when they enter into learning English and developing literacy in English. Failure to leverage and make explicit the similarities and differences between English and their home language can result in confusion and errors, and denies ELs the power of building on linguistic resources in their first language. For both reading and writing, the different sounds and sound-letter relationships between English and other languages can confound literacy tasks. This also applies to language structures and syntax.	Cross language awareness is built through “in the moment” discoveries about transfer prompted by teacher and students, as well as by explicit instruction and transfer curriculum. Teachers need support (charts, readings, coaches) to understand the comparison of English to the languages spoken by students and how this impacts reading and writing.	Cognate charts. Transfer charts. Transfer curriculum. Color coding of text/print in classroom differentiating English from other languages.
Writing	The practice of turning words and sounds into text (writing) is the reciprocal practice of turning text into sounds and words (reading). By partnering instruction and engagement in both the productive and receptive aspects of literacy, student strength in both are enhanced. Conversely, failing to engage students in writing instruction and active writing processes can hamper their skill development as readers, and limit their understanding of the purposes and motivation for literacy.	Because writing draws upon the vocabulary and syntax ELLs have internalized, it typically includes linguistic resources from both of their languages. Student’s written work can be a powerful source of formative assessment for teachers related to informing responsive ELD instruction, identifying cross-language approximations and informing “transfer” instruction.	Writing is part of daily curriculum and schedule. Writing & reading instruction and practice are aligned by genres. Collaborative, shared writing and independent writing all occur. Student as author. Teachers analyzing EL student writing through cross-language lens.
High Volume Print Access/ Active Engagement with Text	Access to print and opportunities to engage with books/reading is a basic equity issue, and also a key causal determinant of becoming a strong reader. Where students don’t have this access or opportunity to engage with books, their motivation to become a reader is diminished, and their understanding of the purposes of text is limited. As with all skills, the more you do it, the better you become. Limiting students’ access to a variety and volume of print gives them less practice.	As a matter of both messaging and access, it is important that books be made available in home languages of students.	Classroom libraries with a variety of books (genres, languages, topics) accessible to students - and time in the schedule for free reading time. Book loans/ borrowing programs. Family literacy programs.



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Print Immersive, Language and Content Rich Environment	Young children learn from interacting with their environment – playing, interacting, inquiring. The degree to which the learning environment is content rich (tangible, hands on, visual) to build meaning, and is language and print rich greatly enhances their overall learning. To attempt to develop literacy in a learning environment that is void of print (no labels, signs, charts, books) limits their understanding of the purposes of print, and denies them the resource of being able to turn to the walls and environment for examples of print and as reference. English learners in particular rely on visual and tangible reminders and supports and scaffolds as context for understanding.	The combination of a content rich environment that includes print labeling and referring to that content is a powerful bolster to comprehension and for language and literacy development. For English learners, this is doubly impactful if it includes print in their home language in addition to English (color coded).	Posters, labeling (<i>color coded by language</i>), inquiry centers with hands on materials related to academic content, class libraries including informational text as well as narrative (in multiple languages).
High Quality, Diverse & Culturally Inclusive Materials	Books and curriculum materials matter. If ELLs are only exposed to books in which people of their community/ ethnicity/culture aren't represented, they learn that books aren't for people like themselves. This directly impacts motivation and engagement in reading. In addition, if the only books and reading they are exposed to are simple decodable books or simplified impoverished written material, they have no opportunity to develop expressive, complex, beautiful language – or to fall in love with the written word.	If English learners are only exposed to books in English, it communicates that literacy is a province of the English-speaking world only. Books in home languages strengthen home-school connections, and enable ELs to build cross-language awareness.	Teachers reading aloud complex, expressive literature and writing – and scaffolding engagement with such text. Books in classrooms in multiple languages, and representing a rich diversity of experience – including the cultures and communities of families/children in the classroom and school.
Support for Home Language & Bilingualism	ELLs come to school with a language and with linguistic resources to draw upon in the processes of learning academic content and becoming literate. Enabling students to draw upon those linguistic resources in their home language is a significant asset. Failure to invite and facilitate use of home language linguistic resources hampers literacy development. Furthermore, where students receive the message that their language & culture are not affirmed and respected, motivation to engage in literacy and academic work can be negatively effected.	Research has shown that drawing upon and building cross language awareness strengthens literacy. An affective filter hinders language and literacy development where students do not feel safe, affirmed. Socio-cultural factors of language status impact motivation to learn.	Posters, print messages about value of bilingualism. Print in classroom/ school walls in languages of the homes. Opportunities for students to use their home language. Workshops and materials for families to support home language.

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Flexible, Differentiated Instruction Based on Formative Assessment	Learning to read and write is a process that is highly variable in how quickly students develop the skills and the specific supports and scaffolding they need. One size does not fit all. Whole group instruction with standardized pacing and duration and intensity of timing is far less effective than differentiated instruction based on formative assessment. A standardized approach wastes some students' time and doesn't adequately allow for individualized scaffolding.	ELLs often need more building of vocabulary & background knowledge than EOs. Reliance on decodable books that tend to have stilted language structures and lack meaning hamper both second language development and comprehension.	Literacy centers and small group time built into schedule. Students grouped by need for literacy instruction. Teachers engage in robust formative assessments (including examining student work, observation).

In a comprehensive approach, all of these components are important. Each supports the others. No component alone constitutes a reasonable reading or literacy approach. It is the integration of all of the elements, the coherence and alignment of the approach over years, and the responsiveness of instruction to student need that add up to effectiveness for English learners.





Alignment Across Grades

Developing skills as a reader and writer doesn't just happen at one point in the schooling journey, and it doesn't look the same at all age and grade levels. Skill in reading and writing develops across the years. Across this journey, students need developmentally appropriate instruction about reading and writing, clear modeling, plentiful access to books, multiple opportunities for practice and application, valid assessment, and specific feedback. The journey begins in the preschool years with establishing the precursor skills for literacy and early engagement with texts. The journey continues with a focus on all of the elements of literacy instruction in the critical primary grades, and builds depth and complexity particularly related to comprehension and linguistic complexity in text in the upper grades as students are increasingly relying upon literacy to engage in a range of disciplinary text and genres.

In a developmentally appropriate approach, the emphasis for young children is on building a strong base of oral language. The more oral language a child has, the stronger the foundation for learning to read and write. Through hearing and producing the language in the context of relationships and exploring and learning about the world, children build the vocabulary and internalize how language is structured – essential precursors to reading and writing. Readiness to attend to print varies among young children. A foundation is built for later literacy by focusing on the precursor skills including developing rich oral language and extensive vocabulary, building phonemic awareness, engaging children in positive exposure to books, building an understanding of basic concepts of print, offering an initial focus on alphabet and letter symbols, building skills of memory and visual recall, and fostering awareness that there are multiple languages and cross-language connections (including for ELLs, awareness of their own dual language-ness).

Chart: The Journey Towards Becoming a Reader – from Preschool through Elementary School.

Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten	Primary grades: Kindergarten, First and Second Grades	Upper Elementary
Focus on the precursors to literacy: Develop rich oral language and wide vocabulary, build phonemic awareness and overall linguistic awareness, provide positive exposure to and engagement with books, model concepts of print, include an initial focus on alphabet and letter symbols, and instill awareness that there are multiple languages and that children are developing bilingualism.	Focus on learning to read and becoming readers and writers: Instruct foundational skills, emphasize plentiful engagement with books, focus on wide vocabulary development, teach comprehension skills and emphasize meaning making. Utilize and develop literacy skills in the context of academic work, and where possible as part of integrated thematic unit study. Writing is paired with reading, and children become authors. Small group opportunities for skills practice and review. Cross language connections and transfer (home language-English). Print and content rich environments immerse students in access to books and essential references and tools. Where possible, reading instruction occurs in the home language (strongest language) first or simultaneous with English as second language.	Focus on continuing development of literacy: Engage students with text types of various genres of print as appropriate and linked to academic thematic units; Introduce more sophisticated engagement with language functions and complex structures as found in academic text; Continue exploration of cross language connections. Actively utilize literacy skills as part of academic tasks. Where possible, continued development of literacy in both home language and English, and engagement with literacy in both languages for academic study and pleasure.

Effective literacy development for ELs embraces a second language development pedagogy, and recognizes their dual language brains and identities through affirmation and activation of the home language and building of cross-language connections. In these ways, it is different than literacy development for monolingual English speakers.





How to Fit All of This In

Whatever is done in the name of prioritizing literacy skill development must not result in cutting access to other important subjects and curriculum. In purchasing curriculum, in setting expectations for teaching, in monitoring what is happening for English language learners throughout the day, administrators must pay attention to protecting access to the full curriculum.

Each element plays an important role in developing students into the literate readers and writers they need to be. However, each element does not require its own separate curriculum and its own discrete time in the day. That would be impossible to make fit within a school day. And, in fact, an effective literacy approach rests on the integration of these elements and the understanding of the cumulative and interactive benefits of integration.

In addition to explicit reading and writing curriculum and instruction, writing and reading are skills that should be used and honed throughout the curriculum – in the process of learning content. Planning for integrated thematic approaches is one way to ensure that whatever is being worked on as a reading skill or a writing skill is reinforced and developed throughout the day. It also ensures that reading and writing are developed in the context of the vocabulary and knowledge of the content being studied – greatly enhancing comprehension, relevance and motivation. Content based chants, for example, can embed and build the vocabulary students will encounter in reading, build phonemic awareness, increase engagement, support oral language development, and can be used as “text” to find examples of blended consonants and other phonics elements. Interactive read alouds with well-selected books can be culturally inclusive, model complex and expressive language, build vocabulary, be utilized to emphasize and practice comprehension skills, and be thematically connected to the content being studied bolstering social studies or science concepts. Passages from that text can be used for linguistic analysis in ELD/ESL focusing on particular structures of English language and text that an English learner is ready to learn. This type of integration is powerful, but it requires that curriculum materials be approached as flexible, that teachers are clear about what skills they are developing and in what sequence, and have the skills and time to plan for integration.

The challenge is that much of the curriculum that is marketed to schools is narrowly focused on just one or two elements of literacy, or represent a language arts approach devoid of connection to the rest of the academic content of that grade level. Packaged ESL/ELD curriculum too often isn’t designed to respond to the linguistic demands of the rest of the grade level academic content. This leads to stacking up a series of unconnected curriculum through discrete time slots in the day. It is not coherent, it is disjointed, it adds up to too many minutes in the day crowding out subjects deemed “less important” and “electives”, and it fails to leverage the power of what teaching and learning can be when there is more integration. This is a key element in the narrowing of the curriculum that has devastating consequences long-term, especially for English Learners.



To pull off the kind of integration that most powerfully supports language/literacy development and learning, requires:

- *Building blocks curriculum designed for teacher flexible use in response to student need.*
- *Planning time for teachers.*
- *Grade level collaboration to align and integrate curriculum.*
- *Teacher time and collaboration for robust formative assessment.*
- *An infrastructure of support for teachers (such as coaching, resource librarians).*
- *Professional development for teachers to support their role in literacy development and integrated language/literacy/content learning, and their use of formative assessments to guide differentiation.*
- *Flexibility in curriculum implementation to differentiate and respond to student needs.*
- *School administrators/leaders knowledgeable about the components of comprehensive language/literacy development for English learners, prepared to support a comprehensive and integrated approach and monitor student progress using appropriate assessments.*

Finally, in addition to literacy education and language development, we have a legal, educational and ethical responsibility for equal access to an education for our English language learners. A bottom-line principle needs to be that whatever is done in the name of prioritizing literacy skill development must not result in cutting access to other important subjects and curriculum (e.g., science, social studies, the arts). In purchasing curriculum, in setting expectations for teaching, in monitoring what is happening for English language learners throughout the day, administrators must pay attention to protecting access to the full curriculum. This is both a matter of minutes in the day and curriculum time, and of appropriate and adequate scaffolding to enable English learners to comprehend and participate in that full curriculum.



National Committee for Effective Literacy

The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL) uplifts research, policies and practices to ensure that English learner/emergent bilingual students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English and preferably more languages and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. We are researchers, teacher educators, teachers, administrators, school board members and advocates from across the nation with deep expertise in literacy and the education of English learners/emergent bilingual students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Laurie Olsen, Ph. D. was the founding Director and now serves as Strategic Advisor to SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language) and has designed, demonstrated, evaluated and implemented effective PreK-12th grade English Learner programs and services throughout California over the past four decades. As a researcher, writer and provider of leadership development and technical assistance related to immigrant and English Learner education and language access, Dr. Olsen has published dozens of books, articles, and videos on English Learner education, including the award winning “Made in America: Immigrant Students in U.S. School” and “Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Promise for Long Term English Learners”. Dr. Olsen served as Co-Chair of the California Task Force to develop the English Learner Roadmap PreK-12 policy for the state, and currently leads the Design Team of EL RISE! to support statewide implementation of the CA English Learner Roadmap policy PreK-12. She holds a Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Studies in Education from U.C. Berkeley. Dr. Olsen serves as President of Californians Together.



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