



The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
Le Secrétariat de la littératie et de la numératie

What Works? Research into Practice

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How can teachers promote strong literacy development among English language learners?

Research Monograph # 5

Promoting Literacy in Multilingual Contexts

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“The way I see it everything has to relate to the identity of the students; children have to see themselves in every aspect of their work at school.

My overarching goal as a teacher is to uncover all that is unknown to me about my students – linguistically and culturally, and especially to understand the community they are part of (their parents, their friends, their faith) and the list goes on. So, when a student enters my class, I want to discover all that I can about that student as a learner and as a person.

For example, when Tomer entered my class last year, a lot of the work he produced was in Hebrew. Why? Because that is where his knowledge was encoded, and I wanted to make sure that Tomer was an active member and participant in my class. It was also a way for me to gain insight into his level of literacy and oral language development.”

Lisa Leoni, Ontario TESL Conference, November 2005

Teachers can promote strong literacy development among English language learners (ELL) by supporting students in relating their pre-existing knowledge to new learning.¹ For English language learners, the integration of new learning with prior knowledge involves connecting what students know in their first language to English. We must explore classroom strategies that have proven effective in helping students transfer knowledge they have in their first language to English.

Active engagement with literacy is fundamental to student success in school. Data on the reading achievement of 15-year-olds in almost 30 countries shows that “the level of a student’s reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socio-economic background, indicating that cultivating a student’s interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages.”² A significant challenge for teachers is cultivating literacy engagement among ELLs who can’t access the language of the curriculum.

There are no formulaic “off the shelf” responses to this challenge. However, we can learn from the innovations of Ontario educators, who have begun to transform the linguistic challenges faced by English language learners into opportunities for linguistic and cultural enrichment for all students.

Research Tells Us

- Active engagement with literacy is fundamental to student success in school.
- The key to literacy engagement for English language learners is connecting what they know in their first language to English.
- English language learners require at least five years to catch up to English-speaking students in the acquisition of academic language skills.
- Ontario educators have introduced promising innovations in English language education that are transforming linguistic challenges into learning opportunities.

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Literacy in Transition

New Terminology

The term *English language learner* (ELL) has come into increasing use internationally among educators and researchers because it distinguishes students from the programs (whether ESL or ELD) that support their language learning needs.

Many Roots, Many Voices
A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/>



Let us consider the changing nature of literacy, and what makes academic language so much more challenging to acquire than everyday language.

Literacy has traditionally been thought of, and taught as, reading and writing skills. This traditional conception is still largely reflected in formal assessments of academic achievement. It is increasingly evident, however, that traditional notions of literacy need to be expanded to encompass 21st century literacies. The Ontario Ministry of Education's Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 defined literacy as "the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas."³ This definition gives equal weight to language and images as means of representing ideas. In addition to reading and writing, multiple modes of representation are included within the scope of literacy. This leads us to consider the potential of new technologies (e.g., web pages, Internet-based sister class projects) to amplify the impact of our literacy instruction and further engage our students.⁴

What is academic language? Children with normal language development come to school at age four or five fluent in their home language. We spend another 12 years attempting to expand this linguistic competence into the sphere of literacy.

The major challenge for students in the early grades is learning how to decode written text. Students acquire decoding skills by means of balanced instruction. This instruction develops their awareness of how the sounds of the language map on to written symbols; it also encourages them to apply these skills in the context of extensive reading and writing. However, the acquisition of fluent decoding skills in the primary grades is only the first step to becoming a strong reader.

As students progress through the grades, they are required to read increasingly complex texts in the areas of their studies (science, mathematics, social studies, literature). The complexity of academic language reflects:

- the difficulty of the concepts that students are required to understand;
- vocabulary in texts that includes many uncommon or technical words, rarely used in typical conversation; many of these come from Latin and Greek sources (e.g., predict, photosynthesis, sequence and revolution); and
- increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions (e.g., passive voice) that again are almost never used in everyday conversations.

Students are not only required to read this language, but also to use it to write reports, essays, and other forms of school work. We find this language predominantly in books. Therefore, students who read extensively both inside and outside the school have far greater opportunities to acquire academic language than those whose reading is limited.

How long does it take ELLs to acquire academic English? Research suggests that, in the early stages of learning how to read and write, English language learners can learn decoding and spelling skills concurrently with their acquisition of basic vocabulary and conversational fluency. This finding is similar to the experience of students in French immersion programs; they learn decoding skills through French despite the fact that their knowledge of French at the Grade 1 level is far below that of native-speakers.

In contrast to their relatively rapid acquisition of conversational fluency and decoding skills in English, English language learners typically require at least five years to catch up to their English-speaking peers in literacy-related language skills (e.g., reading, writing, and vocabulary).^{4,5} These trajectories reflect (a) the linguistic differences between academic and conversational language, and (b) the fact that English language learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target; native-speakers of English are not standing still waiting for ELLs to catch up.

It is not surprising, then, that newcomer English language learners in secondary schools are faced with formidable challenges in gaining access to the curriculum and catching up academically. Many of these students will run out of time, or

become discouraged and drop out before they have caught up in academic English. One recent analysis of Canadian data showed that “the inequity in reading achievement between immigrant and non-immigrant students ... is more than three times as serious as the inequity associated with SES [socio-economic status].”⁶

Based on recent research and practice in Ontario schools, we can identify strategies to accelerate English language learners’ literacy development.

Strategies for Success

Develop a coherent language policy at the school level: In a typical school situation, ELLs may receive support from an ESL teacher for one or two periods a day. During the rest of the day, students participate in a regular classroom situation. If students are to gain access to the curriculum and expand their English language abilities, the classroom or subject teacher must know how to include all students in the learning process. It is no longer sufficient to be an excellent science or math teacher in a vacuum; we need to know how to teach these subjects to all the students in our classrooms, including those in the process of acquiring academic English. Students are likely to require instructional support across the curriculum for several years after they have become reasonably fluent in conversational English. In other words, implementation of effective instruction for English language learners is not only the ESL teacher’s responsibility; it is the responsibility of the entire school.

Clearly, school administrators have crucial responsibilities and opportunities; they must work collaboratively with teaching and support staff to develop policies and practices appropriate to a multilingual school community.⁷ A school language policy will articulate a set of beliefs underlying the school’s mission – in other words, its identity as a learning institution – and the roles of all members of staff in pursuing that mission. The language policy will articulate the choices we have as educators and the images of students implied by those choices. For example, does the school language policy view students as bilingual, with talents in both their home language and English, or just as learners of English whose home language is irrelevant to academic success?

If we agree that ELLs require academic support across the curriculum, what steps do we take to ensure that all teachers have the expertise and knowledge base to deliver that support? If we agree that respectful and effective communication with parents is a central part of our school’s identity, how do we ensure that students and parents (who may speak little English) feel welcomed in the school when students are first enrolled? If we agree that maintenance of students’ home language is important for family communication, students’ cognitive and linguistic development, and their future contributions as Canadian citizens within a global community, what steps do we take to encourage students to take pride in their linguistic accomplishments and to expand their first language and literacy skills? In developing school-based language policies, educators can take advantage of excellent resources that have been developed within Ontario.^{5,8,9}

Link the curriculum to students’ prior knowledge and encourage them to read and write extensively: The following strategies have proven effective in linking ELLs’ new learning to their prior knowledge, and in promoting active literacy engagement:

- Purchase dual language books and encourage students to bring these home to read with parents; provide opportunities for bilingual students to write in both their first and second languages in order to create their own dual language books.
- Encourage newcomer students to write in their first language and then work with more fluently bilingual students, older students, parents, bilingual teachers, or community volunteers to translate their first language writing into English; publish these dual language stories on the school web page or in book form.



Ontario Schools in Action

For examples of implementation of dual language writing strategies:

- Hawthorne Public School (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board)
www1.ocdsb.ca/HawtWeb/HawthorneWrites
- Thornwood Public School (Peel District School Board)
The dual language showcase:
<http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/>
- Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat Webcast on Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Ontario
<http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/archive.html>
- The Multiliteracies Project:
www.multiliteracies.ca
- Fuchigami, M., Newton, S., Kopczewski, F., & Students and Staff of Hawthorne Public School. (2006). *Hawthorne writes ... because everyone has a story*. Ottawa: Ottawa-Carleton District School Board



ELL Resources from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

All LNS resources may be accessed online at www.edu.gov.on.ca. Simply select Literacy and Numeracy from the Popular Topics menu.

Inspire (Online Journal)

Visit the Equity section for articles on teaching ELLs.

Webcasts

Look under “Archived Webcasts”

- Multilingual Ontario
- Differentiated Instruction
- All Children Can Achieve

For information about the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat:
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- Provide encouragement for students to present their individual or group project work (e.g., a poster or PowerPoint presentation) in both English and their home languages.
- Across the curriculum, look for ways in which students’ prior knowledge and experience can be expressed and expanded. For example, in mathematics, have students carry out surveys of the languages they know and how they use them (e.g., with whom, for what purposes) and then graph the results.

Teach in ways that affirm students’ identities: One of the most frustrating experiences for newcomer students is not being able to express their intelligence, feelings, ideas, and humour to teachers and peers. The language barrier makes it easy to underestimate what students are capable of and what they aspire to achieve in school and with their lives. Hira, a Grade 5 student in Lisa Leoni’s class, expressed this frustration:

“Teacher gives me a little work to do but I want to be smart and do a lot of work. Teacher gives the little work because I can’t speak in English. I want to be smart to tell teacher I know English very much.”

In Sum ... Discovering Opportunity in Challenge

Teaching is about human relationships. The more we as educators learn about our students, the more they are likely to learn from us. Ontario educators have demonstrated that English language learners’ cultural knowledge and language abilities can be mobilized within the classroom as important tools for learning and as resources to fuel literacy engagement. The systematic development of language policy at the school level is a crucial next step to extend these innovative practices into schools across the province.

In examining our current instructional practices, we need to ask ourselves to what extent they construct an image of the English language learner as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented? Does our pedagogy acknowledge and build on the cultural and linguistic capital (prior knowledge) of students and communities? To what extent are we enabling all students to engage cognitively and to invest their identities in learning? To what extent might we harness new literacies and new tools to reinforce traditional literacy?

We need new pedagogies for new times. Research has clearly delineated the challenges, but it has also highlighted opportunities and promising new directions.

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