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Instructional Needs for English Language Learners

Miriam Crinion & Amanda Witte, Ph.D.



**NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
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Key Points:

- English language learners (ELL) are the most rapidly growing student population in the United States. ELL students currently make up 7.1% of the public-school students in Nebraska (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).
- ELL students have historically been marginalized within the school community. An important way that educators and administrators can support ELL students is cultivating a school environment where all students and their families feel welcome, appreciated and supported. This includes practices like including ELL students in the general education environment as much as possible, fostering home-school collaboration, and encouraging cultural pride in ELL students and appreciation for diversity across all students.
- Some of the challenges ELL students face in accessing a high-quality education experience include lack of English proficiency, inadequate English language learning curriculum resources, and discriminatory practices from teachers. To help ELL students overcome these barriers, it is important that educators are trained to implement culturally responsive educational practices into their classrooms and schools.

Background

English language learner (ELL) typically refers to a student whose native language is other than English. The majority of these students have either immigrated to the United States or have immigrant family members. Native American or Alaska Native students whose primary language is a tribal language also qualify as ELLs. Another criterion is these students have limited English reading, writing, or speaking skills that impede their ability to meet national English proficiency standards (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011).

English language learners (ELL) are the most rapidly growing student population in the United States. Between 2000 and 2016, the population of ELL increased from 3.8 to 4.9 million students. California has the highest percentage of ELL in their student population (20.2%) while West Virginia has the lowest (0.9%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The Midwest region has also seen a surge in their ELL student population over the last decade (Brooks, Adams, & Morita Mullaney, 2010). From 2012 to 2017, Nebraska increased its ELL student population by 2,984 students (Nebraska Department of Education, 2018). ELL students currently make up 7.1% of the public-school students in Nebraska (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The educational challenges that these students face along with the rapid growth of the ELL population necessitate an evaluation of how educational systems can best serve these students.

Educational Challenges for ELLs

For ELLs, a lack of English proficiency is the primary barrier for accessing quality educational experiences. ELLs must work twice as hard at school as their native English-speaking peers as they must simultaneously learn curriculum material and a new language (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). Schools exacerbate this problem when they designate

separate learning environments for ELL students. Segregated classrooms restrict ELL students' opportunities to learn conversational English from their native English-speaking peers (Hinton, 2017). Additionally, segregated classrooms offer ELL students few opportunities to receive differentiated instruction. These disadvantages are reflected in ELL's consistently low test scores across subjects.

Low socioeconomic status presents another challenge for ELL students. These students tend to live in low-income neighborhoods with under resourced schools that cannot accommodate ELL instructional needs (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). ELL students are also less likely to receive early childhood education services which places them developmentally behind their English-speaking peers by kindergarten (Capps et al., 2005). When ELL students reach high school, they may be forced to seek employment and forgo educational opportunities to financially support for their families.

Cultural barriers also exist for English language learners at school. The behavioral expectations in U.S. schools don't always align with students' cultural behavioral norms. Similarly, school discipline strategies may be unfamiliar and extremely aversive to English language learners. ELL students also face cultural barriers during instruction. Teaching methods and classroom daily routines frequently differ from how students were taught in their home country (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). Educators' attitudes towards English language learners also contribute to cultural barriers. Teachers often have low expectations for ELL students' academic achievement (Garcia, 2015). Consequently, many ELL students are provided instruction at a developmentally inappropriate level and are discouraged from achieving their academic potential (Nieto, 2013). On the other hand, when ELL students do struggle to grasp content, teachers often attribute the student's performance to their immigrant status and family background instead of examining how the school environment may be impeding student learning (Suarez-Orozco, 2011).

The evidence indicates that ELL students have unique instructional needs. When educators and education systems fail to address these needs, it results in adverse consequences for these students. ELL students are one of the lowest academically performing student groups. They are also at greatest risk for dropping out of high school (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). Although there is much research to explore on English language learners, a number of evidence-based practices have been developed to enable ELLs to achieve academic success.

Teacher Training

In the U.S. education system, there is a severe shortage of teachers that are adequately trained to teach English language learners (Brooks, Adams, & Morita Mullaney, 2010). The existing ELL teachers are consequently burdened by large caseloads. In 2010, the ratio of ELL students to teachers in Indiana was 243 to 1 (Brooks, Adams & Morita Mullaney, 2010). Due to general education teachers' and administrators' unfamiliarity working with ELL students and their families, ELL teachers are also frequently asked to assume administrative roles with ELL students. Many schools, particular low-income urban schools, experience difficulty in retaining high quality ELL teachers (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). Given the dearth of teaching resources for ELL students and the strain that current ELL teachers experience, there is an imminent need to provide culturally responsive teaching training to all teachers and administrators.

Gay and Howard (2000) have developed a two-stage model for training teachers to become competent at meeting the needs of multicultural student populations (Gay & Howard, 2000). The first stage involves expanding teachers' knowledge of cultural and ethnic diversity. Educators should begin this process by diving into their own ethnic identity and cultural

consciousness. By engaging in this self-examination, educators will hopefully recognize some of the biased beliefs and assumptions that they hold of students from other cultural backgrounds.

The goal is also to help educators realize the impact that their cultural beliefs and values have on students' learning experiences. Teachers should also seek out opportunities to learn about other cultures. Some examples include engaging in conversations with others about their cultural background, attending multicultural community events, and consuming literary, visual, and audio material created by diverse artists. The hope is that teachers can identify and embrace the multicultural issues that exist in their school.

The second stage involves applying this cultural awareness to pedagogical practices. The first practice is embracing different learning styles. If teachers only accept one type of learning style in the classroom, they are alienating and unjustly punishing diverse students. One of the examples provided by Gay & Howard (2000) was writing instruction. European-American students are more likely to organize their thoughts in a topic-centered way whereas students of color tend to organize their thoughts through topic chaining. Both methods are valid for constructing a narrative. It is also critical that teachers encourage students to learn how to work with other students who possess different learning styles (Gay & Howard, 2000). Teachers should be accepting of the diverse learning styles of students and committed to finding ways to include all learners.

Related to embracing learning styles is integrating diverse perspectives into instruction. For example, when teaching a history lesson on the civil rights movement, teachers must include the voices from the multiple individuals and groups that were involved in that movement, not just one side of the story. This not only enhances the content of the history lesson, but also enables minority students to feel that their ancestors' experiences are adequately represented in their learning.

Gay and Howard (2000) also highlight the necessity for teachers to receive a foundation in multicultural education (Gay & Howard, 2000). Some topics of multicultural education include funding patterns and legislative policies regarding the education of multicultural students, the media portrayal of minority students' academic abilities, and the history of multicultural educational practices. Gay & Howard (2000) also emphasized that there is not a singular or correct way to approach multicultural education (Gay & Howard, 2000). The priority for teachers and administrators should be identifying the multicultural needs within the school community and devising ways to fulfill said needs.

Lastly, it is critical that teachers understand how to conduct culturally valid assessment practices. Most standardized testing measures were normed on White, European American students. Consequently, these tests do not adequately measure minority students' academic abilities. There are multiple alternative assessment methods that teachers can utilize to evaluate these students' skills including dramatizations, role-plays, interviews, observations, peer feedback, and audio and visual journals. If these alternative testing methods are unfeasible, then it is the educator's responsibility to teach all students the test taking skills and strategies necessary to perform well on the exam.

If teachers refuse to embrace multicultural instruction, then they will continue to deny ELL students culturally responsive educational experiences. Teachers should not fear integrating multicultural instruction as there are multiple opportunities for teachers to improve their cultural competency. The two-step model devised by Gay and Howard (2000) was created to help teachers recognize and address multicultural issues that exist in classrooms and schools (Gay & Howard, 2000).

Curriculum Development

There are particular elements that are critical for providing culturally responsive education to ELL students. Montecel and Danini (2002) conducted a study with ten outstanding bilingual education programs in Massachusetts to determine these essential elements. The sample included primary and secondary schools. The majority of students at these schools were low income and enrolled in bilingual programs. In addition, these schools had low retention and dropout rates and low percentages of ELL students in special education. The researchers analyzed a number of different outcomes related to instructional practices, school leadership, school climate, and community engagements and then identified common elements across schools.

One factor present in all schools was evidence-based curriculums that were founded on second language acquisition theory. ELL students learn English differently from their native English-speaking peers. It is also best practice to encourage preservation of the student's native language. Thus, an ELL curriculum should involve a combination of instruction in the student's native language and English. General education and ELL teachers should also coordinate curriculums. One example is the child's classroom and ELL teacher simultaneously teaching the same set of vocabulary words so that the students learn the word in both languages. It is also critical that this curriculum is based on the student's previous level of instruction. ELL students that demonstrate average or above average level of intelligence should not be placed in reading and writing programs that are designed for struggling readers and writers (Montecel & Danini, 2002).

The ELL curriculum should also integrate the student's cultural knowledge. One common way to activate children's prior knowledge is to read books that are culturally relevant to students. The greatest benefit from this exercise appears to be keeping ELL students engaged in learning (Montecel & Danini, 2002). When students are motivated and interested to learn, they are more likely to take academic risks which leads to greater knowledge acquisition (Rizzuto, 2017).

Finally, it cannot be emphasized enough that ELL students need to be held to high academic standards. In all of the schools, teachers set ambitious academic goals for ELL students and were committed to enabling these students to achieve these goals. This attitude also extended to helping students accomplish personal and career goals. One of the teachers' main priorities was preparing ELL students to do well in post-secondary institutions (Montecel & Danini, 2002). These teachers clearly believed and actively demonstrated that all students regardless of their demographics can be successful learners.

Special Education

There are two primary problems with special education services for ELL students. Similar to the general education curriculum, there is a lack of culturally responsive pedagogical practices built into special education ELL curriculums. Many of the same recommendations that apply to general education instruction also are relevant to special education instruction for ELLs. For instance, teachers should provide instruction in both the child's native and English languages. Children who received instruction in both languages were less likely to be placed in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2000). In addition, teachers should seek out training related to providing culturally responsive special education instruction.

The second problem is an overrepresentation of ELL in special education programs because language learning issues are often misinterpreted as learning disabilities. Two preventative approaches to this problem include culturally valid assessment methods and Response to Intervention (Liasidou, 2013). As mentioned previously, many assessments have

been normed on White, European American students. Therefore, these assessments are less likely to accurately estimate an ELL student's academic ability. If a school needs to assess an ELL student, they must determine if student's English proficiency is sufficient for traditional testing methods or if alternative assessment methods should be explored. Response to Intervention is composed of three tiers of increasing intensity of services. The purpose of this model is to identify struggling students early and provide them individualized instruction so that they can remain on the general education track.

ELL students who are in special education have dual disadvantages of language difficulties and lower cognitive skills. Special education programs need to respond to both types of instructional needs. In addition, schools should evaluate the percentage of ELL students that are enrolled in special education and determine if there is an overrepresentation of these students in special education.

School Culture

ELL students have historically been marginalized within the school community. These students were placed in segregated learning environments, received inadequate instruction, and were not recognized as valued members of the school community (Rizzuto, 2017). An important way that educators and administrators can support ELL students is cultivating a school environment where all students and their families feel welcome, appreciated and supported.

ELL students need to be included in the general education environment as much as possible. It may be necessary for ELL students to be pulled out once or twice a day for English language instruction, but all remaining instruction should be in the general education classroom (Russell, 2012). It is also important that school staff promote inclusion of ELL students by building and maintaining strong relationships between staff and students. When teachers participating in the Montecel and Danini (2002) study developed good rapport with ELL students, the school was able to recognize and address the needs of these students more effectively.

Another element of inclusion is valuing the diverse experiences of students in the school. Students should feel proud of their native language, cultural background and ethnic identity and feel comfortable celebrating their heritage at school. Some ways that schools can encourage appreciation of diverse backgrounds include hanging posters about different cultures in the school, hosting multicultural events for students and families, and owning library books that represent diverse voices (Henderson Murphy, 2018).

Strong family-school collaboration is an essential element of promoting a child's academic success (Epstein, 1991). Parents should be viewed by teachers as partners in educating the student (Montecel & Danini, 2002). Parents should also have a good understanding of the school's academic and extracurricular programming. However, it is often difficult for ELL families to access the school community because of language and socioeconomic barriers. Although family engagement requires more effort on behalf of the school staff, ELL parent involvement enhances students' opportunities to succeed.

Conclusion

As the population of ELL students continues to grow in the United States, teachers and administrators will continue to have students in their classrooms and buildings who possess unique instructional needs. Some of the challenges ELL students face in accessing a high-quality education experience include lack of English proficiency, inadequate English language learning curriculum resources, and discriminatory practices from teachers. To help ELL students overcome these barriers, it is important that educators are trained to implement culturally responsive educational practices into their classrooms and schools.

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Authorship Information:

Miriam Crinion

School Psychology Doctoral Student

Graduate Research Assistant

Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

miriam.crinion@huskers.unl.edu