



Success Indicator IN09: The ELs' instructional program reflects the understanding that language acquisition varies individualistically and allows each EL the time he/she needs to develop academic language and literacies across the content areas. (5886)

Overview: The path and pace of a learner's second language acquisition depends on a wide range of individual and environmental factors. As such, the time and support that an individual student needs to meet school required proficiency levels cannot be generally predicted or prescribed. Only a flexible and comprehensive instructional program that gives students opportunities to engage in meaningful, age/grade appropriate, and challenging learning activities will meet their needs as they develop their mastery of academic content, language, and literacy.

Questions: What factors might affect a students' language learning? How are academic content and language skills (inter)related? How can school leaders guide the development of instructional programs that provide the flexibility and time needed to support EL students in their individual language learning trajectory?

What factors might affect a students' language learning?

CA number of misconceptions dominate discourse in schools regarding (second) language learning, and have led to several well-meaning but ill-formed policies and programs. For example, the belief that students' use of their first language impedes their second language development has resulted in programs that discourage or forbid first language use. Similarly, the folk notion that younger children always learn languages better than older ones has facilitated the discouragement of many adolescent and adult language learners (McLaughlin, 1992). When teachers and (older) learners approach language education as hopeless due to the age of the students, the outcomes of these efforts tend to mirror the expectations. Lastly, the idea that simple exposure to a new language is sufficient to learn it has resulted in the placement of students in classrooms without much needed language supports (the "sink or swim" immersion method). One Arizona policy, for example, suggested limiting the length of ESL services in many cases to one year. Not surprising to language researchers, this measure failed to improve academic outcomes among school age English learners (ELs) (Wright, 2008).

In contrast, instructional programs grounded in current research on language teaching and learning acknowledge and incorporate the reality that language learning is complex. These programs appreciate that language learning progress depends on both a learner's own characteristics and the learning environment (Ortega, 2009). Important learner characteristics include their age, their motivation, their willingness (or anxiety) about using English, their beliefs about language learning, and the influence of the language(s) they already know. Important aspects of the learning environment include relationships with language learning peers and peers already competent in English, the activities in which they use English, and any ideologies or stereotypes about speakers of a learner's first language(s).

Not all these aspects can be changed, and not all are under a schools' control. However, they can still inform an instructional program that considers the needs of language learners at the same time as it pursues academic standards.



How are academic content and language skills (inter) related?

Students use language to work with academic content, but academic development and language development do not occur in lockstep with one another. Because the relationship between academics and language is complex, it can be difficult to reconcile the long process of language learning with the demands of an academic year.

One estimate states that language learners need at least five years to catch up to native-speaking peers in their use of language for academic purposes (Cummins, 2013). However, this construct of “catching up” has been both controversial and difficult to measure, for several reasons:

- Language learning progress depends on the specific practices, academic or otherwise, that the language will be used for (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Larsen-Freeman, 2006). In a single academic setting such as a science classroom, language with a range of complexity and features might be used. For example, the language of a textbook may be challenging for an EL to produce themselves, but they may still be able to read and discuss the content of the text.
- All students regardless of English proficiency will continue to learn new ways of communicating at school and throughout their lives (Gee, 2012; Janks, 2000; Martin, 2009; Rymes, 2014). This means, for example, that sometimes even beginning ELs and their English-knowledgeable peers might both learn specialized vocabulary for the first time together in a lesson that introduces it (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In these cases, asking whether ELs have “caught up” to native speakers is less appropriate than asking how all students can be supported.
- Discriminatory attitudes about language learners can also get in the way of assessing their progress when they are inadvertently held to higher standards than native speaking peers. Native English-speaking students can also struggle with academic language and content, and advanced ELs who struggle deserve similar support that does not only focus on language (Flores, Kleyn, & Menken, 2015).

How can school leaders guide the development of instructional programs that provide the flexibility needed to support EL students in their individual language learning trajectory?

Schools with EL populations need program structures across grade levels that allow flexibility in responding to student needs. Because language learning takes many years and new ELs can enter a school in any grade, instructional programs for ELs need to prepare all grade level teachers to work with a range of English proficiency. This preparation requires ongoing staff professional development and structures dedicated to collecting and reviewing data about learners as they rise through multiple grade levels (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011).

Across grade levels, teachers of ELs will encounter similar challenges of balancing language and academic content, so this area is a good target for professional development. Differentiating between academic goals and language goals ensures that progress in each area is achievable. When assessing the language demands of an academic task, teachers should differentiate what is essential for all learners from what may be an opportunity for growth for ELs. For example, in a social studies classroom, to debate the causes of a historical event may require more complex or different language skills than to explain the causes of the same event. If the social studies curriculum only requires an explanation, a debate might be inappropriately difficult for some ELs. Determining appropriate language targets depends on both academic goals and EL students’ current language development.

Professional development in this area should go beyond one-time information sessions. Collaborative and ongoing professional development structures for language teachers include peer coaching, study groups, and mentoring (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003). These structures amplify existing expertise and can also align well with cross-grade structures for reporting and tracking student progress.

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