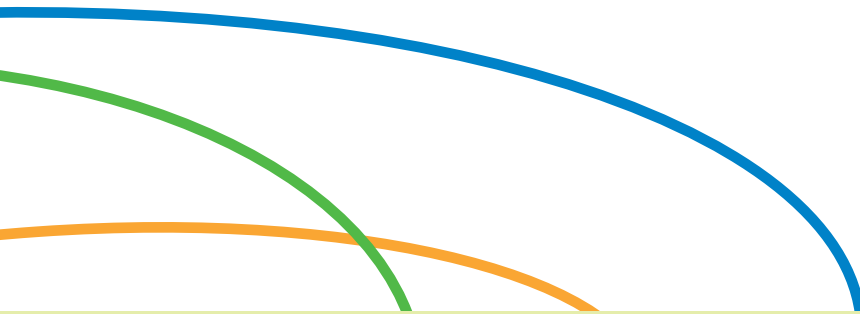# HOW DO I TEACH ENGLISH LEARNERS?

THE CHALLENGES CONTENT TEACHERS FACE — AND WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT THEM

> ## "In my head, English learner is too broad because there're these English learner kids and those English learner kids — and they're different."

By Felice Atesoglu Russell

High school content teachers are often unfamiliar with teaching English learner students in the mainstream. They are sometimes unsure of the needs of English learner students and do not know how to teach them or what expectations to set (Lucas & Villegas, 2010).

As a researcher, I spent over a year at Vista International High School (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). The school was in an urban district outside a large metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest. After observing and interviewing teachers, I unpacked the perceived instructional challenges that content teachers articulated in their work with English learners in the mainstream. At the time, the school was focused on inclusion for English learner students within mainstream content classes, and the principal provided focused support and professional learning opportunities.

The school included English learner students in mainstream classrooms and gave them access to curriculum in the content areas as quickly as possible. Those English learner students designated as beginners had several periods of English learner-specific support classes in the content areas. Students identified as intermediate or advanced, however, had a class schedule of entirely mainstream classes except for one period of English learner writing support.

The curriculum in the English learner writing support class aligned with the mainstream language arts curriculum and supported the assignments from the mainstream class. The design of English learner student class schedules gave students expanded access to the core content curriculum.

INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

Teachers at the high school were responsible for teaching a large number of students. A content teacher had about 150 students. With roughly 30% of the student population identified as English learners, each content teacher was responsible for the instruction of about 45 English learner students.

The content teachers recognized that each English learner student came to school with his or her own experiences in formal schooling and in a particular content area as well as with the English language and U.S. schools. This awareness of student backgrounds and the differences between individual English learner students and their experiences with school did not necessarily facilitate the content teachers' ability to meet the instructional needs of English learner students. In fact, teachers described numerous challenges.

Teachers identified four areas of perceived instructional challenge: Meeting disparate individual needs; insufficient preparation for working with English learner students; insufficient information about English learner students' knowledge, backgrounds, and abilities; and assessment demands and accountability.

MEETING DISPARATE NEEDS

Katie Hanover, a science teacher with a few years of teaching experience, had spent enough time at the school

to gain an understanding of her English learner students and their needs. Still, meeting the individual and varied needs of English learner students in the context of her content classes challenged her.

"There's definitely distinct different groups," Hanover said. "You can characterize the African students a lot differently than the Latino students. … There are some students who speak Asian languages that don't have any sort of translation services or anything." Noting the different ways these students approach school, Hanover said, "In my head, English learner is too broad because there's these English learner kids and those English learner kids — and they're different."

Teachers recognized that the label for English learner students was too broad, yet weren't clear how to make sense of that and differentiate instruction in a way that would meet individual English learner students' needs.

Liz Phillips, a first-year biology teacher, experienced competing instructional needs with two English learner students. One had a limited science background and was struggling to understand the concept of a scientific model. The student had missed class, so Phillips talked with him one-on-one about the material he had missed from class. At first, he struggled with the concept. When Phillips offered multiple examples, he began to understand.

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had studied the topic of cells in his native language, yet he did not have the English vocabulary for sharing his knowledge. The student knew what mitochondria were and what they did, but Phillips could tell the student was frustrated by not being able to explain his thinking and knowledge to her.

The first student struggled with understanding a scientific concept due to lack of background knowledge and experience in science. The second student struggled with how to communicate his already deep content knowledge in cellular biology. This example highlights the complexity inherent in teaching a diverse English learner student population. Teachers recognized that there were individual differences among their English learners and perceived this to be one of the challenges.

Furthermore, English learner students' limited ability to self-advocate emerged as a common theme. Many teachers identified this as a challenge. They wanted their English learner

students to be proactive in accessing print resources, getting support from other students, or asking the teacher for extra help or to clarify assignments. Enabling English learner students to self-advocate was a way to ensure meeting their individual needs.

In addition, teachers were not always sure how to group students. Balancing native language use with the need to practice English during group work was a difficult task for teachers. Teachers were uncertain about how to support English learner students' individual needs through peer support versus when to push students to work independently. Some noticed that, when given the choice, many English learner students would gravitate toward their common language peers. In some cases, this seemed beneficial, but teachers were not always sure that this was true in all cases.

It was difficult for teachers to generalize across all English learner students. Each student brought his or her own linguistic and cultural background. Teachers had greater success identifying instructional challenges when they focused on individual students and the demands those students posed for the teacher.

INSUFFICIENT PREPARATION

In the face of these diverse individual learning needs, teachers' lack of preparation to work with English learner students was apparent. All of the teachers interviewed graduated from traditional teacher education programs within higher education. Most noted that their programs didn't prepare them for teaching English learner students.

Many teachers noted that their student teaching placements were not at schools with a linguistically diverse population. Others said that the comprehensive high schools where they did their student teaching had

programs specifically for English learner students. As a result, the preservice teachers didn't come into contact with English learner students. For many of the teachers, Vista was the first school where they were responsible for meeting English learner students' needs in their content classrooms. They saw themselves as learning on the job.

For some teachers, the lack of preparation in dealing with a culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse content class led to a lack of confidence in working with English learner students. Many noted that they did not always know when to provide specific scaffolds or supports. They weren't sure when to provide a visual, a model of what was expected, or simply write out the directions for a particular task.

INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION ABOUT STUDENTS

Another common challenge teachers noted was how to de-

termine their English learner students' levels of understanding. Among the many areas of insufficient preparation was familiarity with tools and processes for assessing English learner students' language proficiency.

Many teachers recognized that written work did not always convey a true level of understanding of a particular topic. Some teachers relied heavily on oral assessment, including one-on-one conferring and oral defenses. They saw these as opportunities for English learner students to express their learning, providing a more accurate measure of their understanding.

Hillary Bosley, the Advanced Placement (AP) language arts teacher, recognized that there was often a disconnect between what English learner students were able to do orally versus what they were capable of in writing. For instance, she described how one of her students was able to explain her thinking when pushed in a one-on-one conversation conference but was unable to do so in her writing.

"Karen and I conferenced yesterday about her essay," she said. "Orally she's good … but she doesn't come across in her writing." In addition, Bosley noticed that, even though students often had the oral academic language skills, they were apprehensive about speaking up in front of the whole class. It was not always clear what students understood. A math teacher described the ongoing tension of determining English learner students' mathematical ability versus their English language proficiency, regardless of the type of assessment.

In addition, teachers were often unsure about when and how to solicit oral output from English learner students to determine levels of understanding. Teachers recognized a challenge in helping English learner students develop their confidence in using English and speaking up in class.

Stephanie Mackey, the social studies teacher, described the difficulties English learners displayed with speaking during presentations, group work, and social activities. "I do ask students to do oral presentations, and last year, every single student did it and did it well, even the English learners, but getting them to that point where they're confident and prepared and able to stand up and speak — how can I figure out how to support the English learners so they're ready to share an idea, they're prepared, and, therefore, they can participate?"

The challenge for her seemed to be how she could figure out the necessary supports and scaffolds that were most likely to encourage English learner students' oral participation in class. This included giving students an opportunity to prepare before they were asked to share an idea.

Beginning teachers new to the building and to the profession seemed particularly vulnerable. Even if the teacher knew a student's English proficiency level, there were still pieces of the story that made it challenging for content teachers to meet their English learner students' needs.

Jamie Smith, a first-year science teacher, said that, while she had information regarding language proficiency levels, "it doesn't tell you how much science they ever had, how much school they've ever had, where they came from. It's a massive amount of information to get and then process and then apply."

Considering the large number of students and English learner students that a beginning content teacher was responsible for, the amount of information and the learning curve for getting to know this large number of students could be overwhelming. Of course, this was also within the context of learning how to plan instruction, be an effective classroom manager, negotiate the school and district processes, and collaborate with colleagues.

ASSESSMENT DEMANDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Many of the teachers experienced an ongoing balancing act between meeting students' instructional needs and the demands and expectations of state assessments and the AP curriculum. This reality added to the perceived challenges and pressures content teachers expressed. While many of the content teachers felt this pressure, Bosley provided the best example of this.

Bosley approached the topic of instructional challenges related to teaching English learner students with the lens of the AP curriculum. Her focus was on the tension of teaching advanced language arts classes to a large English learner student population with the aim of taking the AP exam. She was not always sure where to focus her instructional energies. She noted: "A lot of it's the time — processing time. AP is a timed test. You have to prepare them to read something and write an essay about it in 40 minutes. Kids who have a hard time, it just takes them longer to read, it takes them longer to write."

Bosley challenged her English learner students in AP language arts academically, and they responded. This was evident through classroom observations. She described how one of her English learner students wanted to use higher-level vocabulary in his writing. He made the attempt but, as a result, his writing did not always make the most sense.

The challenge for her was how she could work with this student to help him figure out how to use these higher-level vocabulary words but know if they make sense or not. This student was using a thesaurus and other available resources in the classroom, but there was a disconnect between what he wanted to be able to do academically — using the higher-level vocabulary — and what he was able to write.

Bosley noted that she graded student work on the AP rubric and that this could be problematic in a class with many English learner students. "The way I'm grading this class is based on the AP rubric. In order to get the highest score, you have to write with really high-level diction — automatically that rubric puts English learner kids at a huge disadvantage. It's also graded on mechanics and punctuation and spelling, so Zaid is playing with big words and is not so successful right now."

The challenge for Bosley was how to help this particular stu-

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dent become proficient at using higher-level vocabulary, knowing that eventually his writing would be graded using the AP rubric that required a high level of diction. Getting her English learner students to that level was the instructional challenge.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Content teachers responsible for the instruction of English learner students will perceive myriad challenges when it comes to English learner students in the mainstream. School leaders can play a pivotal role in supporting and mitigating some of these challenges by recognizing what some of the pitfalls and issues might be for content teachers working with English learner students.

Schools that are successful in meeting English learner students' needs have a coherent vision for instruction and professional development (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Hakuta, 2011). Awareness of potential areas of resistance or tension can help school leaders as they create and support a vision for their schools and provide opportunities for professional learning related to the inclusion and instruction of English learner students.

School leaders can be more effective in how they lead and engage their staff by recognizing that content teachers will be meeting disparate needs of individual English learner students, were not necessarily prepared for working with English learner students in their teacher preparation programs, do not always have necessary background knowledge of English learner students, and are teaching in an era of accountability where assessments often do not align with English learner students' language proficiency levels.

School leaders can support the varied needs of English learner students, as well as their teaching staff, when they focus their instructional leadership efforts on setting a vision of inclusion and support for English learner students across the school and developing cultural norms, structures, and activities to engage content teachers in meeting the instructional needs of English learner students.

These targeted efforts include schoolwide supports for English learner students (e.g. common instructional practices across content areas, targeted academic supports) as well as alignment of program design for English learner students with supports for teachers responsible for the instruction of these students. Considering the dual needs of supporting both English learner students and their teachers will enable both parties the opportunity for success in their respective academic and professional realms.

In realizing the vision and means for such an inclusive school and supportive professional context, school leaders can begin to take steps to mitigate the gulf between developing academic English language proficiency and the demands of content learning in high schools.

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