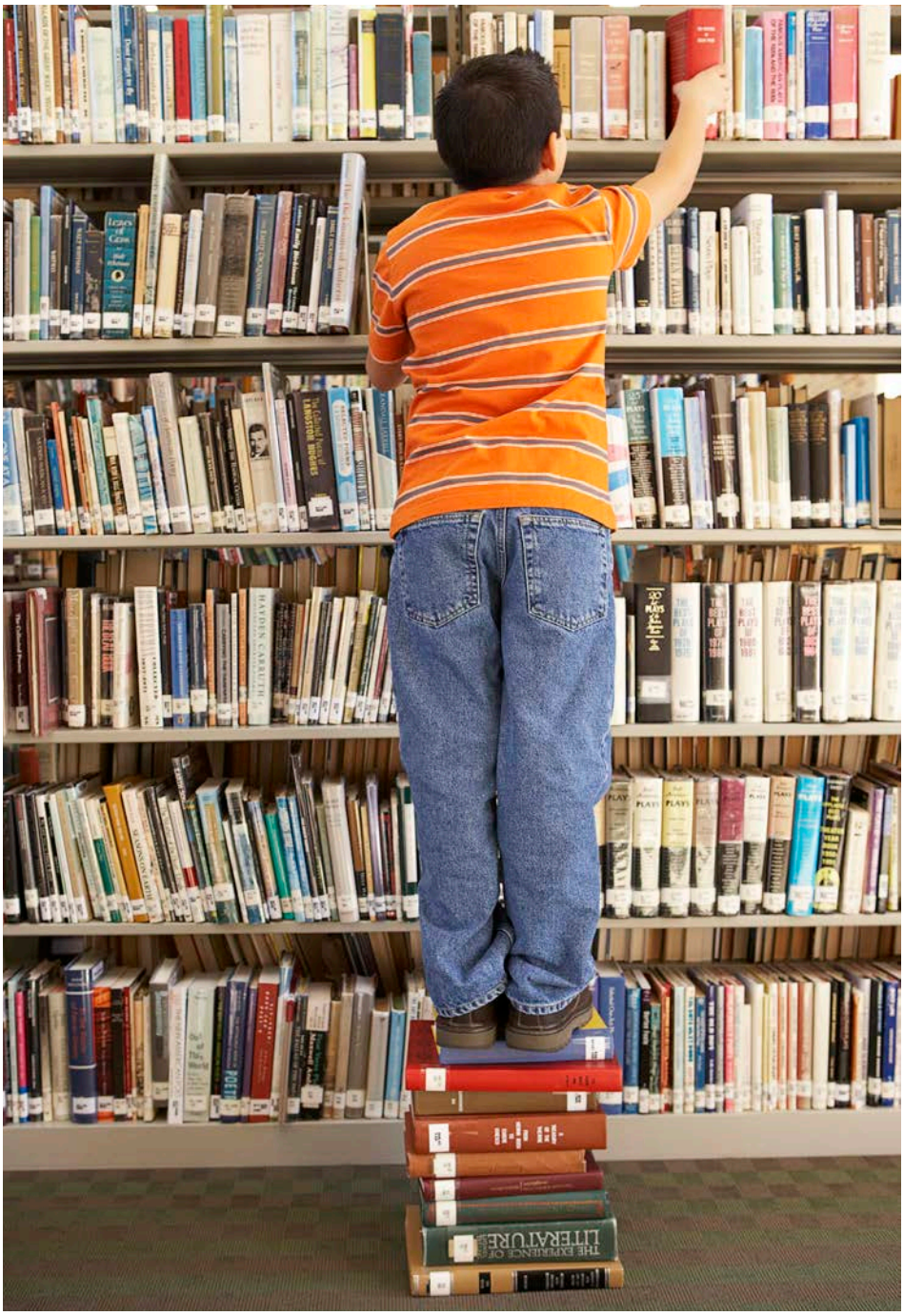


Policies That Support Improving the Literacy Levels of English Learners

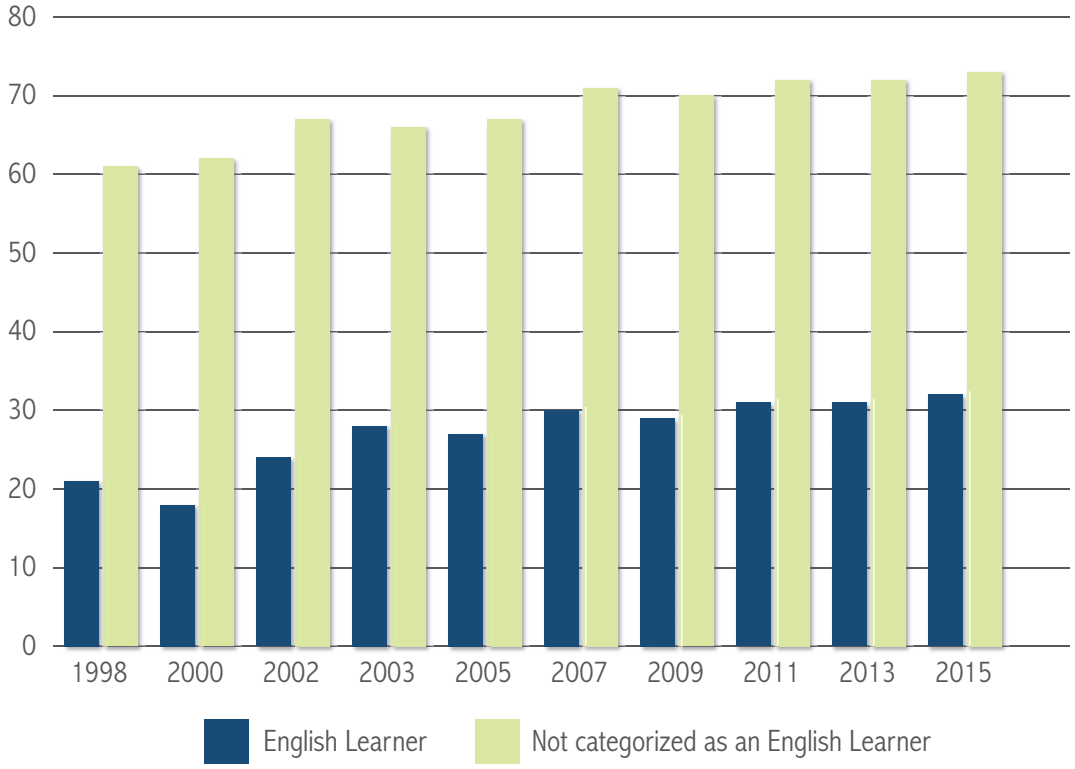
They need both explicit teaching in academic language and full academic participation to help them catch up.

Timothy Shanahan and Jana Echevarria

Literacy is increasingly essential for Americans' health, economic well-being, civic engagement, access to higher education, and social participation. Rapid growth in technology and globalization have increased demand for both universal literacy and higher levels of literacy than in the recent past.

Yet national and international assessments indicate that America's children

Figure 1. Fourth-Grade Reading Achievement on NAEP at Basic Level, 1998-2017



are not meeting these demands. According to the Programme for International Student Achievement, children in the United States significantly underperform those in Canada, Germany, Japan, and 11 other countries.[1] And according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), U.S. reading levels have languished for 12 years—with no improvements at any grade level.[2]

The story is even worse if we look at the nearly five million English learners (ELs) in U.S. schools who are learning rigorous content while learning English, the language of instruction.[3] At fourth grade, 72 percent of native English speakers reached at least the basic level on the NAEP assessment, but only 31 percent of the ELs did, and results are similar in grade 8. These disappointing achievement patterns have persisted since 2000 (figure 1). These data also vary quite a bit by state (table 1, pg 36), which underscores the possibilities for offering better supports for these students.

The vast majority of English learners are U.S. citizens, and their educations are as vital to the future security and welfare of the country as those of any other American students. It may be more challenging to teach ELs to read in English, and yet these children need literacy as much as native English speakers. And making up nearly 10 percent of school enrollment, they have a significant impact on overall achievement.

If schools are to be successful, they must ensure that ELs attain high levels of literacy. To accomplish this, state boards of education must adopt policies and practices based upon the best evidence. That evidence points to seven actions that boards should consider if they hope to raise literacy achievement among English learners.

1. Establish a policy to promote daily, systematic English language instruction. Academic success generally depends upon students'

English proficiency. Adeptness with oral English is implicated in students' progress in reading comprehension and writing.[4] For this reason, researchers Claude Goldenberg and Rhoda Coleman conclude, "developing high levels of English oral language proficiency should be a priority for teachers of English learners."[5]

Often teachers assume that EL students who can communicate fairly well in informal conversations in English are sufficiently proficient. However, conversational English is not enough for academic success. Academic English is more formal, and it requires an understanding of discipline-specific vocabulary and grammar, rhetorical conventions, and academic explanations and argument. Basically, academic language enables students to make a more thorough or denser presentation of ideas, with more explicit connections, than is common in conversational English.

Just as it is impossible to determine someone's English proficiency from informal conversation alone, informal interactions will not prepare EL students for rigorous academic demands. However, effective second-language instruction can provide students with explicit teaching in English while also giving them opportunities to use the second language.[6]

Explicit teaching of English encompasses the teaching of vocabulary, syntax, and language conventions, along with strategies in how to learn language such as note taking or summarizing. Such instruction has been most successful when provided daily in a separate time block dedicated to English instruction. Education policies often seem to be based upon the assumption that English learners can develop a sufficient command of English by participating in the same instructional programs as their English-speaking peers. It would be more effective to require the delivery of a period of explicit English instruction for these students—while still including them in the academic instruction provided to their classmates.

A two-pronged approach—explicit teaching and full academic participation—requires that EL students also be included in meaningful classroom tasks that allow them to interact with English-speaking students. Taking part in group problem solving, discussions, debates, shared lab and art activities, and so on gives students the opportunity to apply their growing English proficiency and to fully master English.

Policies and resources should be aligned to support such a two-pronged approach, as it is the surest way to success. California adopted a curriculum framework that ensures this two-pronged approach. The state requires a minimum of 30 minutes of daily English language development for English learners along with suggested teaching strategies for providing meaningful participation in general education literacy lessons.

2. Support explicit instruction in key literacy components. In the 1990s, the U.S. Congress asked that a group of researchers determine how reading ought to be taught. The National Reading Panel reviewed hundreds of studies on the teaching of reading to native English speakers. It concluded that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension provided the surest progress toward high reading achievement.[7]

Observers often assume that the needs of English learners must be quite different, so the focus on reading instruction should be different. But why would English reading be any different for a student with a different first language? Students still must be able to translate print to oral language and to interpret authors' messages. Explicit teaching in how to do those things could be beneficial to both native and second language learners.

Studies on the teaching of English reading to ELs help us to sort out such matters. The largest review of such studies concluded that, indeed, teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension were all beneficial to ELs.[8] However, that same review found that the learning payoff of such teaching for ELs, though positive, was smaller overall.

The reason for this difference is that such teaching depends upon students' English proficiency. Students may use phonics to translate printed words to pronunciations, but those pronunciations are more likely to be linked to something meaningful for native speakers. Phonics only can help ELs to the extent that pronunciations lead to meaning. Thus vocabulary instruction has the opposite pattern:

Low expectations for ELs are as unwarranted as they are damaging.

Table 1. NAEP Achievement Level for Grade 4 Reading, by State and EL Status, 2017 (percentage)

State	English Learner		Not EL	
Jurisdiction	*Basic & above*	*Proficient or above*	*Basic & above*	*Proficient & above*
National	**32**	**9**	**72**	**40**
DoDEA	63	22	86	51
Ohio	60	24	72	39
Kansas	54	20	73	40
New Hampshire	53	25	76	44
Arkansas	44	14	65	33
Indiana	42	16	74	42
South Carolina	42	15	60	31
Massachusetts	42	14	84	54
Missouri	41	16	70	37
Texas	37	12	68	34
Delaware	37	11	70	38
Connecticut	35	10	77	45
Wisconsin	35	9	69	37
Michigan	35	12	67	34
Louisiana	33	9	57	27
Colorado	33	8	77	45
Georgia	32	10	68	36
Maryland	32	9	73	44
Florida	31	7	78	44
California	31	8	72	39
Virginia	31	8	78	46
Nebraska	30	8	76	41
Oklahoma	28	5	67	31
Illinois	27	6	70	39
Iowa	27	5	71	38
New York	26	5	72	39
Kentucky	25	5	71	39
Maine	25	9	69	37
Minnesota	24	5	76	42
Washington	22	4	75	44
Oregon	22	4	71	39
New Jersey	22	6	79	50
Montana	22	7	71	39
Tennessee	21	4	67	35
Utah	21	6	77	44
Rhode Island	20	4	73	42
Nevada	20	3	70	36
North Carolina	19	3	72	40
Wyoming	19	2	76	42
Pennsylvania	18	5	74	42
Idaho	15	3	73	40
New Mexico	14	3	62	29
Arizona	14	2	66	34
District of Columbia	12	1	60	31
Alaska	12	2	64	32
Hawaii	11	2	66	34
Alabama	‡	‡	65	32
Mississippi	‡	‡	61	28
North Dakota	‡	‡	71	35
South Dakota	‡	‡	70	37
Vermont	‡	‡	73	44
West Virginia	‡	‡	64	32

‡ Reporting standards not met.

DoDEA = Department of Defense Education Activity. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

Source:: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2017 Reading Assessment.

Vocabulary instruction helps all students, but especially English learners.

State boards would be wise to ensure that all students—including English learners—receive explicit, intentional teaching in these essential reading skills, as Colorado's state board did. Their recently adopted comprehensive reading program requires schools to address all of the essential components of reading. More recent research would argue for adding writing to this list of "must-teach" literacy elements, since the teaching of writing has been found to improve reading skills, too.[9] But for English learners, the key is making skills instruction understandable and meaningful by using teaching strategies that have been found to be specifically effective for them.[10]

3. Respect English learners and their home languages, and foster high expectations for EL students' learning. Research over the past few decades has implicated teacher expectations in student learning.[11] If teachers believe that their students are unlikely to learn, they tend to teach in ways that make this expectation a reality—the so-called Pygmalion effect. Many things can spur low expectations: race, ethnicity, language, family income level, and indicators of past academic performance.

The practices that emerge from these expectations are equally varied.[12] Teachers with low expectations for students give them less feedback and explanation when they err, provide less positive feedback when they succeed, spend less time responding to their questions, and give them fewer learning opportunities.

Complicating the issue are some teachers' attitudes toward students' home languages. Rather than recognizing second languages as an asset, some teachers still think they should discourage students' use of the home language, with the idea that this would help them progress faster in English (a prejudice in deep disagreement with research). Instead of making students feel safe and welcome, such teachers inadvertently discourage their English learners.[13]

Objective measures, like nonverbal intelligence quotients and incidence of learning disabilities suggest that English learners as a population are not different from native speakers.[14] English learners are every bit as capable of learning as native speakers, so low expectations for ELs are as unwarranted as they are damaging, and negative attitudes toward languages other than English are more likely to interfere with student learning than to increase it.

There are two reasons that EL students so often lag in reading. First, ELs must learn much more than their native-speaking classmates. They have to master the content of school subjects and English at the same time. Naturally, there will be gaps in comprehension of subject matter while they are learning English. Second, schools are often ill equipped to adequately support English learners. Teachers may have little knowledge, preparation, or sensitivity for teaching ELs, and their students therefore are deprived of the benefit of teaching practices found to facilitate comprehension and the mastery of English.[15]

Through their public statements, actions, and policies, state boards can encourage faculties and administrators to display positive attitudes and high expectations for the ongoing, long-term success of the English learners in their states. One tangible way to communicate high expectations and respect for multilingualism is approving a seal of biliteracy. Adopted by more than 30 states, the seal is an award given in recognition of students who have attained proficiency in two or more languages before high school graduation. At the district level, state boards can encourage professional development efforts that provide teachers with an understanding of language acquisition, the cultural and linguistic assets EL students bring, and effective instructional approaches for EL students.

State boards are in a great position to encourage local districts to implement family inclusion efforts.

4. Encourage the development of positive and supportive relationships with families. As with other children, the parents and families of English learners have a strong impact on their children's academic success. Unfortunately, teachers sometimes underestimate the interest and commitments that these parents have for their children's education and consequently fail to take advantage of this valuable resource or even to keep EL parents in the loop. Yet the parents of English learners can, will, and do help their children with school, especially when they are aware of problems that their children may be having. When schools send home instructional activities focused on early literacy, the parents of English learners complete this work with their children.[16]

It matters whether children are lagging because of failures in their teaching or their lack of English.

The amounts of reading and other literacy work in a home language also influences children's reading progress in English.[17] Parents should be encouraged to read to their children, to encourage their children to read books at home, and to discuss with their children what they are reading, and these activities should take place in whatever language they are comfortable with. For example, children may read a book in English but talk to a parent about it in Spanish.

If parents are to fully support their children's education, they need to feel welcome at their kids' schools and be included in school meetings and events. Sending invitations to parent nights and other meetings in the family's language shows that their language is respected and that they are part of a family-school partnership. Other school information should be provided in the parents' language as well. Similarly, teachers may use interpreters, as needed, to help with ongoing communication with parents about their children's progress. However, school staff should be trained in how to work with interpreters so that home-school communication is positive and effective. (The children themselves should not be placed in the role of interpreter between parents and teachers.)

Many states, including Minnesota, Wyoming, Lousiana, and New York, offer an English learner parent handbook that invites parent involvement and provides an orientation to policies and practices in schools. Although state boards (and even local school boards) do not usually communicate with parents directly about their individual children, they can set policies that encourage family involvement by, for example, requiring that forms and notices be translated into students' home languages and providing intepreters for meetings. State boards are in a great position to encourage local districts to implement family inclusion efforts, and doing so can pay off in better state literacy achievement.

5. Ensure that high-quality professional development is provided for teachers. Let's face it. If districts are to foster high levels of literacy among English learners, then they need to equip their teachers (and principals) to deliver. School boards need to make sure that the hiring and professional development policies in their districts make that possible.

Professional staff attitudes and practices underpin quality instruction, high expectations, and positive home-school relations. Fortunately, professional development can enhance attitudes toward English learners and improve instructional effectiveness.[18]

To be effective, professional development must be ongoing; one-shot training typically fails to change attitudes or practices. Effective training also tends to integrate theory and research with demonstrations of specific teaching practices; provides time for practice, feedback, and coaching; and includes administrators and supervisory personnel so that they have a clear idea of what teachers are trying to accomplish.[19] Sufficient budgets must be available to support such training, and contractual arrangements should allow teachers and principals to participate.

Members of state boards of education need to be aware of the wide range of effective professional development approaches various states are taking with regard to their policy involvement in preservice education, induction, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and teacher education.[20] While about half of states do not require professional development for teachers of English learners, states such as Texas, Virginia, and New Mexico mandate ongoing training. For instance, Texas requires that up to 25 percent of a teacher's license-renewal professional development include instruction about educating diverse student populations, including students of limited English proficiency. These policy

options provide a sound path for improving the literacy achievement of EL students.

6. Encourage appropriate assessments and their appropriate use. Education policymakers need to consider the specific reasons for assessment. If a test is aimed at evaluating students' knowledge of content or their literacy, then adaptations may be needed to ensure that the tests evaluate attainment of these goals rather than simply measuring students' English proficiency. Language interference can be mitigated by reducing the number or difficulty of items or by providing support (e.g., reading instructions aloud to the students, translating instructions, orally explaining the task). If EL students cannot understand the instructions for a test, then the results of even a good test are unlikely to be valid.

Teachers should frequently use informal classroom assessments such as skills checklists, exit tickets (end-of-lesson response cards), observations, and participation rubrics to gauge EL students' understanding of the material and progress in English language development. Examining student work yields valuable data about where additional teaching is necessary. After all, the point of assessments is to inform and guide teaching. Professional education efforts in the states should ensure that teachers of English learners know enough to collect and use such data appropriately.

Annual English proficiency assessment data are typically used to determine EL status and services, but the results are most useful, especially for long-term ELs, when evaluated in a meaningful way; these scores should be used diagnostically. For instance, if an EL student meets proficiency in other domains but not in writing, then writing goals should be set—alongside the student and shared with parents to get their buy-in—and instruction should be provided to address those goals.

State boards should monitor their state's assessment policies to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to reduce the chances of language interference so that accountability measures provide them with accurate information. It matters whether children are lagging because of failures in their teaching or their lack of English. There are many accommodations that help ensure accuracy of testing. However, state policy is needed to guarantee their use. Accommodations for English learners vary greatly by state, and there is no set of common standards across states as to what accommodations are permitted for English learners.[21]

State boards should also carefully monitor the results of state reading assessments and English proficiency assessments to guide their literacy education policies for this group, ensuring that districts have the appropriate resources and guidance to ensure eventual success.

7. Provide appropriate instructional interventions in reading. Increasingly, school districts are trying to meet the needs of students who may be struggling academically with "response to intervention" or multitiered response systems. The idea of these efforts is to monitor students' progress closely and to both enhance basic classroom instruction and provide additional targeted interventions (usually labeled as tier 2 interventions) aimed at giving additional assistance to the strugglers with the lagging skills. For instance, beginning readers often struggle with decoding, so a tier 2 intervention might offer additional phonics (or phonemic awareness or fluency) lessons for such students.

English learners may manifest decoding problems too, so decoding-oriented interventions make a lot of sense, especially in the early grades. However, many ELs (and other children, too) have sufficient decoding skills but really need high-quality language and literacy instruction in the regular classroom and in any interventions deemed necessary.

Schools should provide both decoding- and language-oriented interventions to address the needs of all their students. However, when disproportionate numbers of ELs are identified as needing interventions, resources would be better directed toward improving professional development for staff on effective classroom literacy instruction for English learners.

State boards should monitor the identification rates of ELs to ensure that these students are neither being sent to such interventions or special education solely because of their lack of English proficiency, nor should such supports be withheld from these students for that reason. State boards should monitor the tier 2 program offerings in their states to ensure that these response-to-intervention efforts can meet the needs of all

students. Many states, such as North Carolina, Illinois, and California, have processes in place to avoid over- or underidentification of English learners for interventions or special education services, and they have published them online. It is the responsibility of state boards to monitor their state's identification rates of English learners to ensure that they are appropriate.

Final Word

State boards are responsible for ensuring all students' academic success. They meet this responsibility through their adoption of sound educational policies. If English learners are to achieve academic success, state boards need to ensure that districts are providing systematic English instruction, explicit teaching in literacy, high-quality professional development for teachers, appropriate assessments and interventions, and, by fostering respect for English learners, setting high expectations for their learning and supporting positive relations with their families. ■

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[15]Jana Echevarria et al., *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017).
[16]Goldenberg et al., "Sociocultural Influences."
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[18]Goldenberg and Coleman, *Promoting Academic Achievement*, 108–11; Ellen McIntyre et al., "Teacher Learning Development," *Literacy Research and Instruction* 49, no. 4 (2010): 334–51; Kim Hyunsook Song, "Systematic Professional Development Training and Its Impact on Teachers' Attitudes toward ELLs: SIOP and Guided Coaching," *TESOL Journal* 7, no. 4 (2016): 767–99.
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