

Elevating English Learners (ELs)



Academic Supports for Newcomer Students

This paper, Academic Supports for Newcomer Students, is one of a series of three papers that focus on newcomers. The other papers in the series include Programs for Newcomer Students and Social and Emotional Supports for Newcomer Students.

Overview

Students who arrive in the United States from other countries (newcomers) represent a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds, and a variety of experiences in their home countries. To support these newcomer students academically in U.S. schools, it is important to understand their backgrounds and how schools can take that into consideration to help develop their linguistic and academic abilities.

Recent Central American Newcomers

Recently, most newcomers are coming to the United States from one of three Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). Although El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are predominantly Spanish-speaking countries, all three have indigenous peoples with unique languages: Guatemala has 23 nationally recognized indigenous languages (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). As a result, many students, especially those from rural areas, may speak an indigenous language in their homes and communities, with somewhat limited exposure to Spanish.

Education is free and compulsory through grade six in Guatemala and Honduras, and through grade nine in El Salvador (Education Policy and Data Center, 2014). Instruction is primarily in Spanish, although in Guatemalan primary and secondary schools, instruction may be in any of a number of the country's indigenous languages, sometimes in a bilingual Spanish-indigenous language setting (SIL International, 2014). Attendance in secondary schools in Central America is more common in urban areas among nonindigenous students, and formal education is less common in rural areas (Edwards, 2002). For example, only one in 10 rural Guatemalans attends middle school (Cooperative for Education, 2014).

Due to instability in their home country, time out of school, migration to the United States, or a lack of resources in their native country's schools (Gallegos, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009), many newcomers will have had limited or interrupted formal education. Schools will find that newcomers may score two or more years below their peers on reading and mathematics assessments, and may not be

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literate in their native language(s) (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010).

Linguistic and Educational Background

Many newcomer students have experienced trauma and stress in their home country, in their journey, and in their transition to the United States. Just as with any students who are dealing with trauma or stress, even simply the stress of acclimation to a new place or school, these factors can affect the academic experience. Districts and schools will do well to have systems in place to support the social and emotional needs of newcomers as part of their efforts to support their academic success. These considerations are addressed directly in another paper in this series, *Social and Emotional Supports for Newcomer Students*. One key message is the importance of getting to know, and acknowledging, each student's unique linguistic and educational background.



District and School-Wide Structures for Academic Support

The Council of the Great City Schools (2014) contends that it is important for districts to clearly articulate program models and delivery options for teaching English language arts (ELA) and developing English language for English learners (ELs). Also key is the need to articulate what instructional supports, materials, and strategies the students need, and how the materials will help the students develop English proficiency and meet college- and career-readiness standards. The Council also outlined

three non-negotiable criteria for supporting the academic needs of ELs that include: maintaining grade-level rigor; building knowledge while acquiring and building academic language (in English and/or other languages); and addressing cultural relevance.

In some districts, newcomer students are served by dedicated newcomer programs that are intended to ease these students' transition into the general education system. Newcomer programs can consist of special classes within existing elementary, middle, or high schools, that students attend part of the day, while still attending regular classes with the general population for the remainder of the day. Other newcomer programs are full-day and held at separate site locations, serving students for one or more years of their education. Another paper in this series, *Programs for Newcomer Students*, includes information on these programs. Information on the approaches taken in distinct newcomer programs may be helpful to districts in thinking through their own response to the academic needs of newcomers and how to support them. Given that many students enter U.S. schools with gaps in their education, traditional U.S. educational programs may not fully address their specific academic needs. Incorporating programmatic approaches from programs for students with limited or interrupted formal education may be helpful to support students academically.

Whether welcoming directly into a school, or helping them transition from a newcomer program, several administrative school-wide structures can facilitate the provision of academic support. Perhaps the most crucial of these is to include joint planning periods for content or grade level classroom teachers, special education teachers, and English language development teachers—and counselors where appropriate—to facilitate coordination and communication. This will help to organize teams of professionals across the

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school to share responsibility for newcomers. Offering extended learning time to newcomers, beyond the school day, increases access to supplemental tutoring and enrichment to help them learn English and other subject matters, and offering primary language support can also be a very helpful school-wide adjustment.

Well-Prepared Administrators and Teachers

Schools and districts should plan for necessary staffing, and training of existing staff, to address the needs of ELs with limited or interrupted formal education, and, specifically, newcomers. Santos, Darling-Hammond, and Cheuk (n.d.) contend that all administrators and teachers must understand the implications for ELs of college- and career-readiness standards for curriculum and instruction. They also must have systematic, comprehensive, and sustained job-embedded professional development to acquire strategies to teach the standards. The standards will require that teachers have deep core content knowledge and understand the learning progressions in each core discipline. They will also need to know a great deal about formative assessments to help them understand where students are on the learning continuum, and they will need to have a variety of curriculum and instructional supports to meet students’ needs in ways that produce deep learning. Thus, to provide academic supports for newcomers, teachers must understand and manage

1. *language progressions*, to help students learn language, both in terms of general language acquisition and in terms of the acquisition of discipline-specific academic language;
2. *language demands*, to address the types of linguistic expectations that are in specific texts and the tasks which students must complete;
3. *language scaffolds*, to teach how specific representations and instructional strategies can help students access concepts and the language needed to learn; and
4. *language supports*, to organize the school and classroom-learning environment to help student continually build a deep understanding of language and content.

Classroom Instructional Supports

While facing other hurdles, newcomers must overcome numerous challenges. Calderon (2006) identified ten components of providing effective instruction for ELs, presented as Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners (EXCELL). As shown in the exhibit below, the components cluster into three parts: lesson preparation, lesson delivery, and consolidation of student knowledge.

Component	Strategy
Lesson Planning	
Backward planning	The first step is to identify the desired end result of instruction by selecting the essential standards that students need to meet when they have become proficient in the subject area. Next, identify what students should know, understand, and be able to do to demonstrate mastery, and then determine which assessments will provide the best evidence of student proficiency. As a last step, plan learning experiences and instruction that will lead to student mastery.
Parsing of text by teachers	Based on standards, select the most important content for the semester and break those larger pieces into weekly assignments. Condense and eliminate text that is extraneous to student understanding and focus instruction on what is most important for mastery of the topic.

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Component	Strategy
Summarization	Write a summary or overview of the unit, lesson, or chapter and share it with students. These summaries can take the form of an outline, graphic organizer, or written document. Use the summary to focus students on what is important to know, understand, and be able to do.
Background building	Explore the depth and breadth of student understanding of and experience with a concept, then connect what they already know to what they will learn. Build background around unfamiliar concepts by using graphic organizers, films, pictures, and real objects. While building background, focus on developing the academic vocabulary that's essential for proficiency in the content area.
Review of previous lesson, concepts, and content	Review previously taught lessons and/or what students learned in other grades to form a bridge to new learning. Connecting new learning to previous knowledge will help students move new information into permanent memory.
Use age-appropriate materials	Select materials that expose students to the same activities as their native English speaking peers. This will help the student gain the skills necessary for their current and thus their next stage of academic and social development.
Lesson Delivery	
Explicit instruction of vocabulary	Identify the Tier 1, 2, and 3 ¹ words in the lesson, and then explicitly teach Tier 2 words. Quickly review important Tier 2 words daily throughout the week. Talk with students about which vocabulary strategies work and which should be revised in order to solidify their learning.
Formulation of questions	Pose questions that focus students on what is important to know, do, and understand. Use questions to probe student knowledge and deepen understanding.
Engagement with text	Use read-alouds to model comprehension strategies and thinking about a topic. Target a specific comprehension strategy in each lesson—for example, cause and effect, inference, comparing and contrasting, problem-solving, self-correction, summarizing, questioning, or forming hypotheses. Have students read with a partner to practice the strategies and expand comprehension. Debrief with students about the success of their learning.

¹ Tier 1: Basic words—*fell, mad, good, speak*. Tier 2: High frequency, but challenging words— *clarify, firmly, issue, industrious*. Tier 3: Infrequently used words that are often discipline-specific—*foreshadow, monarchy, vacuole, integer*.

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Component	Strategy
Consolidation of Student Knowledge	
Consolidation of knowledge and skills	Use instructional conversations, graphic organizers, team activities, writing tasks, and debriefing to solidify what students have learned.
Assessment	Use a variety of assessments—performance-based assessments, portfolios, traditional tests, quizzes, or compositions—that are keyed to the way students can best demonstrate new learning.

Teachers also may find that students benefit from additional instructional supports in both the elementary and secondary classroom, such as these identified by Short & Boyson (2012):

- Aid students in the development of conversational English skills.
- Build students’ ability to use visual aids such as idea maps, charts, and graphs during prewriting activities.
- Emphasize academic skills that are important in American classrooms, such as volunteering to speak aloud, working in a group, and supporting opinions.
- Support the use of imagination and critical thinking.
- Use strategies to provide “sheltered” instruction:
 - Build students’ background knowledge for content that may be new or unfamiliar to them.
 - Be patient with students, especially when expecting them to give answers orally.
 - Listen to students’ answers and do not overcorrect; focus on their messages.
 - Use hands-on educational materials and visual aids.
 - Adapt materials to students’ linguistic level without compromising content.

Conclusion

Helping individual students acquire academic language is a complex, long-term process, not an event or a program with a clear end date. Districts, schools, administrators, and teachers play important roles in helping newcomers succeed academically. The approaches identified above may help schools and teachers meet these students’ academic needs as they transition to school in the United States. Districts can support both teachers and students by conducting sustained, comprehensive professional development; fostering collaboration among all teachers; designing programs that support English language proficiency across grade levels and content areas; and fostering continuous school improvement with a focus on student learning.

Resources on Language and Literacy in Central America

- Ethnologue provides background information on languages and dialects spoken in different countries around the world. Information includes language status within a country, literacy rates, and language maps. Links to information on language in Central American countries are provided below:

El Salvador: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/SV>

Guatemala: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/gt>

Honduras: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/HN>

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Resources on Newcomer Programs and Programs for Students with Limited/Interrupted Formal Education

- *Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond*, from the Center for Applied Linguistics, reviews newcomer programs across the country, detailing features of successful programs and student qualities, and offering case studies of exemplary programs. It is available at <http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/helping-newcomer-students>.
- *Enabling Academic Success for Secondary Students with Limited Formal Schooling* is a research report from Brown University that documents programs for students with interrupted formal education. It is available at <http://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/publications/enabling-academic-success-secondary-students-limited-formal-schooling-study-haitian-lit>.

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