

Introduction:

PART I

Host: Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Kristin Simonne, Education Program Specialist from OELA. Joining Kristin for this discussion on evidence-based instructional practices for English learners are Jennifer Blitz, an expert from WestEd and Thea Fabian, a vice principal at Wawona K-8 School in Fresno, CA.

Our panelists will discuss evidence-based instructional practices for teachers that are relevant for English learners in grades kindergarten through 12. We will be highlighting one of five evidence-based instructional practices:

1. Provide English learners with opportunities to build content knowledge and language competence in tandem.
2. Leverage English learners’ home language, prior knowledge, and cultural assets.
3. Engage English learners in productive interactions with peers.
4. Provide direct and explicit instruction focusing on key aspects of literacy.
5. Incorporate regular opportunities to develop written language skills.

This podcast will focus on the practice of leveraging English learners’ home language, prior knowledge, and cultural assets.

In Part I, Kristin will speak with Jennifer, and in Part II she will be speaking with Thea, who will discuss how this evidence-based practice is implemented in her district.

Let’s get the conversation started...

Kristin: First of all - welcome listeners! We are so happy to have you all with us to share these important instructional practices with our audience.

Kristin: Welcome, Jen. Can you tell us why leveraging home language, prior knowledge, and cultural assets is a powerful practice for English learners?

Jen: First, it’s important to remind ourselves that English learners at any level of proficiency can and should be learning the disciplinary content and analytical practices expected of other students at their grade level. And we also have to acknowledge that the fact that they are doing so in a new language, and in ways that may differ from their home culture and their previous schooling, and that makes this process more complex.

But we can’t “wait” for ELs to become fully proficient in English before providing them with opportunities to engage in rigorous learning. Instead, we provide students with a range of entry points.

Luckily, EL students, with their varied—yet often overlooked—assets, are primed to be excellent students. They have immense strengths – particularly related to their languages and cultures. They come to school with knowledge in their home language and from their home culture that

enriches their classroom community *and* their own learning potential. Like this evidence-based instructional practice states, teachers can capitalize on this by acknowledging students' strengths, and creating an environment that is culturally and linguistically responsive- where these assets are invited, shared, and valued for their own right, but also as a means to further students' content and language learning.

As an example, let's consider a fifth grade newcomer student- Luisa- who has recently arrived to the United States from Guatemala. While she has limited English, she speaks Spanish fluently and speaks some K'iche' with her extended family. Luisa is very social with her peers and engages with them both in and out of the classroom. In the academic setting, Luisa is most comfortable with the Spanish/English translanguaging students- students who use Spanish and English language resources freely to communicate and make meaning. Her teachers are aware of the value of engaging students in quality oral interactions and are careful to structure frequent opportunities for students to engage with content orally in small groups. They make sure to partner Luisa with other students who also speak Spanish, allowing for Luisa to expand her speaking skills and discuss content and practices in her home language, or translanguage using Spanish and English.

Luisa's teachers are also responsive to her home and community experiences by incorporating instructional techniques that are culturally familiar. For example, several studies have found that learning through observation is common in many indigenous communities around the world and Luisa's teachers take advantage of this cultural practice by making sure that verbal instruction is accompanied by visual support and modeling. Luisa's teachers also understand that learning is social in nature- that ideas and language are developed through interactions with others- and that this is approach to learning is more typical in communities outside of the US and Western Europe. As such, they are careful to structure meaningful opportunities for Luisa to collaborate meaningfully with others. While modeling, visual support, and collaboration are instructional strategies that all students will benefit from, they are *essential* practices for Luisa for whom learning socially and through observation is a cultural norm.

When we hear from Thea later in the podcast, she'll provide some additional examples of how educators at her school view English learners' cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset and what they are doing to enrich students' development of language and content knowledge.

Kristin: Research has demonstrated that there are significant positive correlations between literacy skills in ELs' first language and the development of literacy skills in English, their additional language. Can you say more about this?

Jen: We know that students who have literacy in their home language have knowledge and skills they can draw upon when learning to read in English. In order to capitalize on home language literacy, we need to understand that being bilingual and biliterate is more than just being proficient in two separate languages. Rather a bilingual individual is constantly making connections across their languages- increasing their awareness about how both languages work, and essentially understanding how each language is unique and what is shared across the two languages.

There are certain literacy skills and concepts that are universal, meaning they will transfer from one language to another. This means that if a student has learned this skill in their home language, it will generally apply to English as well and will not need to be relearned. For instance, the student that we discussed above- Luisa- has literacy skills in her home language that are universal and will apply to her English literacy development. She already has alphabetic awareness, she understands that print carries meaning, and she understands and can use metacognitive strategies like skimming, summarizing, and predicting.

However, there are other skills and concepts that are language specific and will need to be explicitly taught as Luisa is developing proficiency in reading English. Luckily, some of what Luisa knows about her home language- Spanish- will support her literacy development in English because, in many cases, the languages work similarly. As Luisa is developing English proficiency, she is learning English vocabulary as well as how words and phrases are put together to make meaning in English. Learning what words and structures transfer from Spanish to English- and what words and structures don't transfer-will support Luisa to understand both languages more deeply and ultimately to become bilingual and biliterate.

This transfer will be more successful if Luisa's teachers are intentional- if they take time to understand Luisa's proficiency in her home language of Spanish and purposefully support her to engage in compare and contrast analyses of Spanish and English.

For example, English and Spanish have the same alphabetic system. Luisa will not need to learn the full alphabetic system from scratch as she learns to read in English, but rather can learn the many letters and sounds that are the same across the two languages, and then learn which letters and sounds are different.

Luisa's teachers can also intentionally support her to look for and recognize cognates, or words in one language that are similar in form and meaning to words in another language. There are many cognates in Spanish and English, such as *inevitable* and *inevitable* or *action* and *acción*. Luisa's teachers can also support her to recognize word parts that are similar or different in the two languages. For example, the suffix *-idad* in Spanish is used in place of *-ity* in English, creating cognate pairs such as *university* and *universidad* or *generosity* and *generosidad*. Luisa's teachers embed this type of work within content instruction. For instance, when Luisa and her peers are learning about ecosystems in science, they may locate and discuss cognates within their texts such as *adaptation/adaptación* or *conservation/conservación*.

We've talked about the use of home language literacy as a valuable lever to gain literacy in English. Before we move on from this topic, it's important to acknowledge that literacy in the home language is an asset in its own right and the type of language work we just described serves to strengthen that as well. Students who are bilingual and biliterate have advantages beyond the type of transfer we discussed today but also in the development of problem-solving skills and cognition, as well as social, cultural, educational, and economic benefits.

Kristin: Respecting, valuing, and leveraging students’ assets, including their background, cultural, and linguistic knowledge and experiences, presents the clear and direct benefits for students learning English. These practices also create a culture that values the assets this diverse group of students bring and enhances the ability for all adults and students to fully embrace rich cultural and linguistic diversity. Can you talk about this idea and the impact it has on English learners?

Jen: If we support English learners to develop academic English while also treating home languages and dialects as valid and valuable, if we include language activities that support students to develop an awareness of the differences between their home language and English- we are supporting our English learners to develop proficiency in English.

But in doing so we also convey that students’ home languages are valued and that students who speak a language other than English as their home language are respected as equally talented peers; we are equalizing the status of the languages and cultures of the students in class; we are cultivating an awareness and appreciation for language variation; and we are empowering all students to share their knowledge, their culture, and their language.

These types of efforts to support the building of understanding and appreciation across languages and cultures creates opportunities for students to have authentic relationships with students who are different from themselves, laying the groundwork for all students to interact meaningfully with each other and collaboratively build knowledge. These exchanges provide English learners with opportunities to share their cultural and linguistic assets and to act and be viewed as individuals with strength and knowledge

The bottom line is, in our increasingly global society, fostering linguistic and cultural flexibility for our students supports them to build knowledge about and respect for their own and others’ cultures and languages and better prepares them for life in a multicultural and multilingual world.

Kristin: Thank you so much Jen. It is great to really understand why this recommendation is so powerful to enhance language and content development for English learners. But what does it look like in practice? Please stay tuned for the second part of our podcast where Thea Fabian, a Vice Principal of a K-8 school in California’s Central Valley will walk us through some practical examples and share the work she and her school have been engaged in.

Conclusion:

Host: A big thank you to our Jennifer Blitz for discussing the recommendations regarding English learners and evidence-based instructional practices. The information, reflections, and experiences that you shared today will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English learners across the country. Please listen to the second part of this podcast where Kristin will speak with Thea Fabian, a vice principal at Wawona K-8 School in Fresno, CA. We also encourage you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov and check out the many educator resources available there.