

**Introduction:**

**PART II**

**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 the second part of the discussion on evidence-based instructional practices for English learners is Thea Fabian, a vice principal at Wawona K-8 School in Fresno, CA.

In Part II of the podcast Kristin and Thea will discuss how the evidence-based practice of leveraging English learners’ home language, prior knowledge, and cultural assets is implemented in Thea’s district.

Let’s get the conversation started...

**Kristin: Welcome back to our listeners and welcome to the podcast, Thea! We are very happy to have you back with us to discuss these important instructional practices.**

**Kristin: We’ve been talking about how honoring and encouraging students’ use of their home language and leveraging students’ prior and cultural knowledge and experiences can support them in their development of content knowledge and language. It would be great for our listeners to learn about how educators in the field are implementing this practice. Can you tell us about what you and your staff are doing at your school?**

**Thea:** Within our school, we are always working on understanding what it means to recognize students’ linguistic and cultural assets and how understanding the skills and knowledge our students bring to the classrooms can help to inform our work with them. Of course, this extends beyond multilingual students to a philosophy about all students in the school, including for example the linguistic and cultural assets that African American students bring to school.

Our elementary school has a dual language immersion program and so the use of Spanish is constant. Because of the demographics of Fresno, our region, and our dual language immersion school context, the majority of our students are part of Spanish-speaking families or have Spanish language heritage somewhere in their background. Being able to provide instruction in Spanish allows our students to bring in their experiences and tell their stories more easily when those experiences have occurred in Spanish. It allows for a fuller expression of who they are and what they know. In our elementary school classrooms we focus heavily on language-based approaches to content learning. In the primary grades, there is a heavy focus on interactive read-alouds for science, literature, and history learning. Vocabulary development is certainly a key focus, and our teachers employ visuals, physical movement, and frequent oral language practice to integrate new knowledge, ideas, and language resources. For all grade levels we plan our units around the Teaching and Learning Cycle model. This includes a focus on building rich content knowledge, developing the language needed for the writing that students will do, practicing the writing with students through joint construction techniques where you construct a text with students in preparation for independent writing, independent writing, revision, and publishing,

and self and joint reflection of growth. This cycle promotes a strong focus on disciplinary language outcomes, and we are able to combine many rich teaching strategies under this umbrella and framework.

For myself, I communicate with our elementary school students in Spanish to provide an additional model and to validate the importance of Spanish. I also use Spanish flexibly with our middle school students. They have varying levels of fluency but just in using the language, I am able to make a bridge with them. Many of them tell me the story of language in their families, who speaks what and how it works in their homes. These stories are important, and I want them to know that any level of bilingualism is important and positive. These interactions amongst adults and with children are all part of building visibility for our love and appreciation for Spanish and Spanish-language cultures.

Beyond bilingualism, I would say all of our elementary school teachers make room for translanguaging, the skill of using both languages simultaneously to better communicate ideas and concepts. We want our kids to know that, as they develop into fully bilingual people, translanguaging also becomes a part of their communication at times.

We do not yet have a dual language immersion program in middle school grades but we will soon. Even though our middle school classrooms are not part of a dual language immersion program yet, teachers leverage students' home language by providing level-the field-supports. One example of how Spanish is utilized in our middle school is using bilingual and Spanish language poetry in some of our English Language Arts classes. In our middle school mathematics classes, teachers often provide instructions to exercises and classroom routines in Spanish. I have observed science classes where the teacher is presenting scientific terms in both languages. I think this happens partially because we have newcomers from Mexico in our school population but, by providing this opportunity to every student, it also validates the Spanish language heritage of all of our students to whom that pertains. I believe that each of our educators realizes that being bilingual is an asset and that schools can take intentional steps to incorporate opportunities for the use of student languages through classroom activities.

For our newcomers, our district has adopted materials in Spanish and we provide bilingual content-specific glossaries to our newcomers and to other students for whom it will be useful to continue building both languages. Walking into history classes, you can see that a few students are accessing the texts in both Spanish and English to make sure that they keep strong content learning going as they progress in their English skills. We have conversations with students letting them know that this is what we want them to do, to continue using their Spanish language skills and developing these skills while they are also developing high level academic English skills. We encourage our bilingual middle schoolers to use both of their languages to assist newcomers and let them know that this is a special skill they possess.

On the school campus, communication between adults also becomes important. We hold professional learning meetings in both Spanish and English and teachers use both languages to engage in informal and formal conversations with each other. We also have Spanish speaking parents on campus who are employed as campus supervisors. They also use Spanish with the

students, reinforcing even more that bridge between home and school. They understand the cultural context our children come from and how to help them to grow. In many ways these recess supervisors treat all the kids with a special care that comes from understanding the parental cultural expectations and by actively demonstrating caring for each child.

**Kristin: Culturally and linguistically sustaining teaching goes beyond leveraging students' language and culture to support academic achievement in English. This teaching approach also acknowledges that students' heritage, language, and cultural practices are valuable in their own right and seeks to explore, honor, and extend them. What are you and the staff at your school doing to perpetuate and foster students' home languages and cultures?**

**Thea:** One way is that we embrace the idea that bilingualism offers special opportunities to individuals and communities. There's a certain level of pride and self-esteem that goes along with that belief. Our school is currently a K-5 dual language immersion school, and we also have a traditional middle school. In a few years we will have a Pre-K-8 DLI school and so the philosophy of the school generally is that being bilingual and bicultural is an asset.

A lot of the work done in understanding culture is to recognize the superficial levels of culture such as food, holiday celebrations, and the artifacts of culture. We engage in that type of work but we also try to engage with the deeper levels of understanding culture such as understanding values and underlying assumptions that lead people to interact in different ways. One thing that I hope to go deeper with in the coming year is in helping us all to understand the values of Mexican American culture and the ways Mexican American students may exhibit prosocial tendencies that come from their values. These are skills that children and adolescents of different background possess but that are also culturally valued for our Mexican American families. Because this is such a big population for us, it is important for us to connect with these values and understand them well. Some examples of these are helping behaviors, being able to take another person's perspective, and valuing the needs of the family. These can be significant anchors in school planning and interactions for various reasons. One, we can validate these positive behaviors at school and students can see that what their parents and families are teaching them is also valued at school. That can lead to a higher sense of culturally based self-efficacy and engagement with school. Another reason is that when students struggle with behavior at school, we can look to these skill sets that are already validated at home as skills to support and develop through effective interventions.

Yet another area we try to work on is fostering the use of multiple languages on campus and making it comfortable for all people to hear multiple languages, even if they cannot understand them. I believe that's an important part of reducing bias against languages other than English and creating an inviting space where students and families can bring their whole selves through the door. Spanish has a special place because of our population. When parents come to the front office and they either need or prefer to interact in Spanish, they know they will find someone who can interact with them and hopefully meet their needs. I also think we validate the importance of Spanish through these interactions by showing that we think it's important too. We have other languages on campus also, Punjabi, Hmong, Filipino, and others.

Sometimes parents come in because they need help in problem solving. They want a thinking partner more than anything. They also don't completely know all of the tools available to them through our school or through the district. Being there for them and providing this support and access to resources is important. But during these conversations we also validate what they are already doing in supporting their kids. That's important for them to know that culturally, the things they know how to do are valued. This is so critical because we need parents and families to interact with us a lot and to bring us their information, concerns, suggestions, and celebrations. We also need our students to see that we respect their parents and that we are going to work collaboratively with them for the good of all students.

**Kristin: Some teachers may have unintentional or unexamined ideas about how students learn language or how language should be used in an academic setting. How does your staff support students in using and understanding the language associated with academic content, while also valuing the linguistic resources students bring? And how do you and your administrative team support teachers in this endeavor?**

We are working on multiple ways to support students. Because we are in California, we rely heavily on the guidance of our framework and English Language Development (ELD) standards. These have been very helpful for us because they have increased our knowledge of how language might be developed in different academic areas.

One example has been in the way we approach teaching writing. We have been working for the past couple of years on becoming better at understanding how different texts have different purposes, audiences, organization, and language that is used. A story will be written differently than a science explanation and that will be written differently than a biography. Because the work in this area for California began in earnest a decade back, I think now we are at the point where this sounds very logical to teachers. We recognize that knowing how to write different texts is not inherent and that a lot of great instruction needs to be implemented. This includes students interacting with many texts that are like the texts they will produce, using graphic organizers/model to show how the text works, and having rich discussions and instructional activities around the language that makes different texts possible. One example of an activity that many of our teachers have developed expertise around is *joint construction*, which I defined earlier. This practice is incredibly supportive for students in revealing the expectations and parameters for writing tasks.

The learning is not always easy to start with teachers and staff because talking about language work is sort of like speaking an additional language. There are all of these terms, or metalanguage, that make it possible to talk about language. I used to joke that my favorite word was cohesion. When you talk a lot about the language that makes it possible for texts to flow and make sense, you often discuss text cohesion. We need students to know about cohesion and know how to implement it in the different texts they write. In your additional languages this is not obvious, so it helps if your teachers make it explicit. So these learning opportunities for teachers are important, and to be able to develop knowledge of language themselves across multiple years of collaboration and learning.

Another example is vocabulary development. We have done a study of the reasons for the needs of direct instruction in general academic vocabulary through professional learning and the planning of lessons. The strategies that the teachers have implemented include offering student friendly definitions explained by the teacher, providing brief and powerful lessons where students see multiple examples and create sentences to use words, playing vocabulary games with the target words, pairing vocabulary terms with visuals and physical movements, and utilizing the vocabulary in speaking and writing products and in collaborative conversations. We also studied why some other approaches are not as successful, such as students writing down the dictionary definitions on their own as a way to learn. I think this part about recognizing practices that are not effective and why is very important.

Regarding unexamined assumptions, I think the conversation around how different language is appropriate and valuable in different contexts is becoming easier. It used to be that this conversation was very difficult, and people would associate not knowing academic English with not being very smart. That's not the case with the educators I work with. They will tell you that English learners are smart and that they need opportunities to expand their language repertoire so that they can also make gains in their school achievement. I credit this to the ongoing conversations at the university preparation level, the generation of new research in this area, and the conversations happening within professional learning. It is also the result of an increasingly diverse educator workforce. Recruiting more and more bilingual educators and people of color into the teaching workforce is beneficial not only because these educators serve as models for students but because they help to bring in values and perspectives that are needed regarding asset-based approaches to student culture and language. These are socialized values about language and learning so the more conversations we have the better

**Kristin: And lastly, what final recommendations and words of encouragement do you have for our listeners who intend to implement this evidence-based practice into their instructional practice?**

One of the best approaches I have learned is to dedicate significant time and energy to developing collaborative expertise and coherence. We know as school leaders that it is not helpful to come in and say, "what you're doing is wrong, do this instead." This is because it invalidates everything people have been working on and also because it's not true. Teachers and staff are doing a lot of great work already but there are important ways we need to grow in our ability to serve multilingual students and that means that we need to bring ideas together. So, we absolutely need research-based guidance and a lot of opportunities for professional learning and collaboration in this area. Then we also need strong professional learning communities, teams of teachers, to take those ideas and that guidance and those strategies and figure out how to combine it with other critical ideas that they know and within their constraints of the time they have available with their students. Technology will not replace excellent instruction and so it is imperative that for English learners and for all students, we continue to focus on preparing our teaching workforce to the highest standards for excellent teaching and learning. Teachers will also tell you that they need a lot of support and to be able to dedicate significant time and energy into planning. They need time to do "the heavy lifting" just as we want students to do the heavy lifting when they are learning. So this takes time and lots and lots of support and encouragement.

In sum, we need a heavy emphasis on a continuous development of human capital and the necessary support to do that.

**Conclusion:**

**Host:** A big thank you to our panelists 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. We also encourage you to visit the NCELA website at [www.ncela.ed.gov](http://www.ncela.ed.gov) and check out the many educator resources available there.