

New Jersey Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/New Jersey Bilingual Educators, Incorporated

NJTESOL/NJBE Position Statement

**Literacy and English Language Learners in
New Jersey Schools**



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Introduction

Teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) to read and write well in English is a growing challenge in New Jersey. Literacy in English is critical to achievement not only in the academic setting but also in life opportunities beyond the school experience. Therefore, learning to read and write well impacts a child's lifelong journey.

In all situations, English Language Learners in New Jersey schools must be treated respectfully and offered equal educational opportunities that honor basic general educational principles (Nieto, 2004; Ovando, Combs & Collier, 2006, Bennett, 2007, Manning & Baruth, 2009):

- Facilitate learning through group activities
- Encourage teachers to build on background knowledge, language, and culture that their students bring to the classroom (Ajayi, 2006).
- Contextualize teaching in the experiences and skills of home and community (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, Moll et al, 1992).
- Challenge students toward critical thinking.
- Engage students through dialogue, especially instructional conversations
- Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction through the four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Gumperz, et al, 2000).

The New Jersey's English Language Learners

Although each child is unique, most ELLs belong to one of the following sub-populations:

- Young dual language learners (pre K-1) who speak the language of their home but have been raised within an English-speaking community (NCELA, 2008)

- Young learners (pre K-3) whose beginning literacy instruction is in the primary language
- Young learners (pre K-3) acquiring initial literacy in English because they do not have access to primary-language literacy instruction
- Older learners with grade-level, primary-language literacy, who are beginning to develop literacy in English
- Older learners with limited formal schooling in their home country some of whom speak Spanish as a second language and a Latin American Indian language as a home language (Quechua or Qhichua, Maya Quiche, Guarani)
- Older learners with inconsistent school histories, with limited development of either the primary language and/or English, sometimes referred to as Generation 1.5. While there is a great diversity among these learners they are usually schooled completely or partially in the U.S., Generation 1.5 learners differ from other English language learners in that they are familiar with both the U.S. educational system and American culture. These learners typically have developed social and oral language skills in English while speaking or understanding another language at home. Although Generation 1.5 learners vary significantly in their first language literacy skills, they may have low proficiency in academic English required for success in school (NJTESOL-NJBE, 2008).

NJTESOL/NJBE Position Statement on Second Language Literacy Instruction

Developing fully literate multicultural and multilingual citizens is the ultimate goal; however, proficiency in English is a critical objective of language and literacy instruction in schools. Since there are many scenarios in New Jersey schools, there are various situations which call for different services. First, when large numbers of students of one home language are enrolled in a district, it is advantageous to provide primary

literacy instruction in the home language (Rolstad, Mahoney, et al, 2005).

When students arrive in New Jersey already literate in their first language, it is important to build on those literacy skills and transfer students' strengths into the second language (Ovando, Combs, Collier, 2006; Freeman & Freeman, 2006).

Since New Jersey has a K-8 World Language mandate, ideally, districts with a critical mass of students who speak another language should be encouraged to develop dual language programs to promote bilingualism and multiculturalism for all students (Cloud, et al., 2000). In this way, English speakers and second language learners become proficient in both languages. Over thirty years of research consistently show that dual language students achieve as well as or better than non-dual language peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, et al., 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

When students arrive with little or low literacy skills in their home language or there is not a significant number of students from the same language background; it is very important to develop English oral proficiency while developing literacy skills.

In all scenarios, students in grades K – 8 should receive daily direct literacy instruction during a 90-minute block with an additional daily class period of ESL oral language development. Districts should adopt appropriate bilingual and ESL comprehensive reading programs and/or ESL transition programs aligned to the core English program. For successful implementation of high quality programs, instruction that addresses the wide-ranging needs of ELLs with appropriate materials and supplies is needed.

Instruction at the secondary level must account for the language development needs as well as content-knowledge. Curricula and materials with appropriate language modification and strategies that provide additional support for language development must be available to supplement the regular textbooks. As the number of adolescent ELLs grows in New Jersey, it is clear that middle and high school teachers need to learn basic principles of second language acquisition and literacy processes.

All teachers who work with ELLs should become familiar with the second language acquisition and literacy process through high quality, sustained professional development activities. In this way, general education teachers can scaffold instruction throughout the day to support the development of literacy skills.

**Research and Literacy Instruction for ELLs
Language of Instruction
Major Findings of the National Literacy Panel**

- 1. Instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading, (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension) has clear benefits for English Language Learners (National Reading Panel, 2000).**

While these approaches are effective, the research suggests that modifications are needed to increase the benefits for ELLs. Becoming literate in a second language greatly depends on the knowledge and expertise of teachers who provide those modifications. High quality professional development must be offered to help teachers improve classroom practices. High quality professional development practices include: opportunities for hands-on practice with applicable teaching techniques; in class demonstrations; personalized coaching; collaboration with special

education teachers; and assistance from educators with knowledge and experience.

Where primary language literacy instruction is not provided, students need native language supports and a language-enriched program of English language development, which includes literacy and is appropriate to the age and development of the student. Researchers agree that initial literacy instruction in English can be successful, but it carries a higher risk of reading problems and ultimately lower literacy attainment than initial literacy instruction in first language. This risk may compound the risks of poverty, low levels of parental education, poor schooling, and other factors (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998, p 234, NCELA, 2008).

2. Instruction in the key components of reading is necessary – but not enough – for teaching ELLs to read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is also critical but often overlooked in instruction.

For ELLs, a gap exists between the proficiency in word level skills (decoding, word recognition and spelling) and text level skills (reading comprehension and writing). The research suggests that oral English proficiency is the reason for this discrepancy. Well-developed oral proficiency in English is positively associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills. Literacy programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English, in conjunction with high quality literacy instruction are the most successful. For this reason, an additional class period of English oral language development is recommended.

3. Oral proficiency and literacy in the first language can be used to facilitate literacy development in English.

Research has found that it is desirable to develop literacy in the language that is used in the home first, while beginning to build

oral fluency in English (Cummins, 2000; Edelsky, 1986, 1989, Rolstad et al, 2005). NJTESOL/NJBE believes that a strong foundation in primary language literacy facilitates the transfer of literacy skills to English. There is clear evidence that tapping into first language literacy and oral language development provides cognitive and socio-cultural advantages to English language learners (Ajayi, 2006; Cahnmann, 2005; Goldenberg, 2008, Ovando, Combs, Collier, 2006). Therefore, when planning and providing second language literacy instruction to students who are literate in their first language, it is important to take into consideration how reading skills transfer from language to language.

4. Individual differences contribute significantly to English literacy development.

English literacy development is influenced by many factors: age, language proficiency level, cognitive abilities, previous learning, family support and the similarities and differences between the first language and English. Reading difficulties among ELLs may be more a function of individual differences than of language proficiency status. ELLs who demonstrate difficulties with the ability to recognize sounds and to remember them should be provided with immediate interventions in order to prevent later reading difficulties (August & Shanahan, 2006). This difficulty is not usually the result of second language status.

Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners

Studies have found that the relationship between literacy proficiency and academic achievement grows stronger as grade levels rise (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, Kamil et al, 2000). Literacy development is a serious problem for the English language learners who enter the educational system in later grades. Unfortunately, there is not a large body of research on effective instruction for adolescent ELL literacy development.

Not only do these students have to master course content but they have less time to master the English language. Most ELLs require four to seven years of English instruction to reach the academic language proficiency required to function successfully in school (Ovando, et al. 2006). The challenge of acquiring sufficient academic vocabulary is overwhelming. English speaking high school students are expected to have a vocabulary of approximately 50,000 words to be able to master the increasingly complex coursework (Graves, 2006; Nagy & Anderson, 1984). The average ELL learns 3,000 new words each year, so in four years, the average ELL might learn 12,000 to 15,000 words without targeted intervention, far short of the 50,000-word goal. These students are at a distinct disadvantage since they must “double the work” by learning academic English and the content of multiple subjects (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

In addition, an increasing number of ELLs who enter in middle and high school have low level literacy in their home language. These students are most at-risk of educational failure. They are entering New Jersey schools with very weak academic skills at the same time when schools are emphasizing rigorous, standards-based curricula and high stakes assessments for all students (Boyson & Short, 2003).

Newcomers are not the only students struggling. Some English language learners have grown up in New Jersey, but for various reasons (e.g. mobility, switching between different language programs) have not developed the degree of academic literacy needed for success in middle and high school.

Traditional instructional methods do not succeed in literacy instruction for English language learners at the secondary level. Many secondary teachers are not trained to teach basic literacy skills (Rueda & Garcia, 2001; Tharp et al., 2000). Older English language learners with limited or interrupted education need access to primary language literacy instruction and/or early literacy

intervention instruction in English, using age appropriate materials (CATESOL, 1998). Specialized secondary programs must be developed to address the specialized needs of these students.

Assessment

Assessment is another challenging issue with ELLs. Identification measures do not usually provide the needed information for correct placement. Issues such as age of enrollment in U.S. schools, educational background, and mobility all affect literacy development. Most districts do not include assessments in students' home language; yet measures of native language oral and literacy proficiency are strong indicators of English literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee et al, 2006). Therefore, to the extent feasible, NJTESOL/NJBE strongly recommends that districts develop a process of establishing the child's proficiency in their native language upon arrival. Schools can make progress in helping students achieve at higher levels if the placement and interventions are appropriate and targeted to the individual needs of those students.

Under NCLB, districts are required to demonstrate that English language learners are making progress in meeting academic standards and becoming proficient in English. Progress in both areas depends on effective literacy instruction. However standardized tests are not sensitive to second language literacy development. As a matter of fact, what is measured as a lack of mastery in the content areas is often the normal pace of the second language acquisition process (Abedi & Lord, 2001). Without effective assessments or accountability models, teachers struggle to distinguish difficulties in learning English from issues related to educational background and native language literacy skills. As a result, there may be a pattern of over- and under-representation of ELLs in special education programs.

Although, The New Jersey Department of Education has recently implemented native language testing for ELLs whose home

language is Spanish; research, construction, and validation of new and improved assessments of English development and content knowledge learning for all ELLs should continue.

Most importantly, ongoing formative and classroom assessment should monitor the progress of ELLs while simultaneously, informing instruction through careful analysis of data. Moreover, the student's language proficiency level should be considered when collecting data to differentiate instruction.

In consideration of these findings and facts, NJTESOL-NJBE makes the following recommendations for the various stakeholders who impact the lives of the English Language Learners in New Jersey:

Recommendations to Teachers

- Know the English language proficiency level of your ELLs.
- Learn about the WIDA standards.
- Pursue professional development in the area of second language literacy and sheltered and scaffolding instruction.
- Gain an understanding of the range of socio-cultural issues that are involved in educating English language learners.
- Consider ELLs' strengths and background knowledge when planning lessons.
- Secondary level teachers need to learn to teach basic literacy skills.

Recommendations to School Administrators

- Rely on the opinions of well-prepared, successful bilingual and ESL educators to establish programs that make effective use of native language as well as ESL services that support second language development.
- Create, in cooperation with your staff, job-embedded staff development at the school level, in order to discuss best practices for ELLs' education and research that supports them.

- Provide counseling services and orientation for students that go beyond the first day of school. These services are invaluable in supporting students' acquaintance with and adaptations to the new school culture and the host country.
- Review, expand, and monitor school practices and policies so that they recognize and validate the language and cultural experiences of all students, including ELLs.
- Organize ELLs' parent orientation meetings in order to inform them of programs, request their assistance, and demonstrate the school's welcoming attitude toward parental participation.
- Engage your school teachers and administrators in ESL services for parents that include courses and workshops such as the school curriculum for various subjects and grade levels, introduction to computers, etc.
- Tap into community organizations and district resources to seek translation services that would make information accessible to parents who do not speak English.
- Consider the language proficiency level of the ELL when analyzing formative and summative data.
- Cluster students in classes in order to facilitate support for students and logistics of scheduling for appropriate services.

Recommendations to Parents

- Become informed about the educational options available and express your preferences to policymakers and educators.
- Encourage your children to maintain the home language and to become fully bilingual.
- Learn your rights as a parent and be as involved as possible in school activities.

Recommendations to Policy Makers

- Recognize the value of initial literacy instruction in the first language, which will improve the student’s achievement in the second language.
- Recognize the value of dual language programs in the efforts to produce bilingual citizens in this global society.
- Mandate the assessment of the literacy skills of incoming students in both English and their native language.
- Explore the use of a threshold English language proficiency test before testing content areas in English.
- Implement consistent accommodations for ELLs during high stakes testing.
- Build educator capacity to develop literacy skills through relevant professional development activities and the use of a knowledgeable literacy coaches.
- Ensure that all teacher candidates learn about second language and literacy acquisition.
- Fund short-term research and development on literacy interventions for all ELLs from diverse language and educational backgrounds, especially adolescent ELLs.
- Fund longitudinal studies to evaluate promising programs.

Recommendations to Researchers

- Enrich the research base by focusing on the specific gaps in our knowledge.
- Pursue collaborative research agendas across various languages, social, economic and instructional variables on second language learning.

Recommendations to Faculty of Teacher Preparation Centers

- Incorporate a multicultural approach in all your courses. In addition to providing your students with an example to follow, it will help teacher candidates to learn about English language learners and their unique needs.
- Remain connected to the New Jersey schools and use them as “funds of knowledge” to instruct your students on the

demographic shifts that are presently occurring in New Jersey and the importance of learning about the students they will teach in the future.

- Research opportunities to enter into reciprocal collaboration with a New Jersey school. In this manner, you can inspire their teachers to learn about multiculturalism and your students to observe differentiated instruction based on linguistic, academic, and affective needs.
- Discuss in class the academic experiences of your students whose home language is not English, their academic needs and instructional adaptations that would help them in their courses.

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