



# CROSSING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Help English-language learners thrive by plugging in this four-pronged approach to teaching academic language.

By Debbie Zacarian



Let's take a trip to an elementary school in an urban city in the middle of the United States—we'll call it Bustle City Elementary School. A few decades ago, Bustle City's leaders, faculty, support staff, students, and parents were predominantly white, middle class speakers of American English.

Today, its teachers are of pretty much the same demographic. However, its student population has dramatically changed. Most live in poverty, are English-language learners (ELLs), and represent a wide array of diverse language and cultural backgrounds, although many were born in the United States.

Let's leave Bustle City and travel to Oceanside School in a suburban town on the East Coast. While many perceive it as a white, English-speaking community, more than a quarter of its elementary students do not speak English at home. Most speak Spanish, and a small number speak Arabic,

Amharic, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, or Tamil.

Finally, let's end our trip at Prairietown School, a small, rural elementary school. Its principal is noticing a change in the student population. In the past, her school's population had been almost entirely English speaking. Now, there is a slow and steady increase of ELLs in her school and throughout the district. While most are Spanish-speaking, a few speak languages that the principals have never heard of and are from unfamiliar parts of the world.

### Meeting ELL Needs

As these stories suggest, the demographics of the nation's student population is changing. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, the total number of the nation's public school students flatlined between 2001 and 2010, while the population of ELLs grew significantly and continues to grow rapidly. Given this surge, it is important for principals to ask themselves: How successful are we in meeting the changes that are occurring among our student populations?

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/MayJun13](http://www.naesp.org/MayJun13)

✦ The Colorín Colorado website provides information, activities, and advice for educators and Spanish-speaking families of ELLs. Debbie Zacarian contributed a user-friendly guide that spells out the **federal and state laws governing ELL programs**.

✦ Audrey F. Murphy explains **the merits of dual-language programs** in her *Principal* magazine article, "Bilingual and Bicultural."

Whether we measure success in terms of the percentage of students who graduate high school, successfully pass state exams, or attend school on a regular and consistent basis, the outcomes do not paint a promising picture. ELLs are among the lowest performing groups of students in the nation's schools in terms of graduation rates and high-stakes test performance, and they have one of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. Further, for those who earn a high school diploma and enroll in college, the majority quit before receiving a post-secondary degree.

Many of the current federal regulations about ELLs are the result of lawsuits filed in local courts across the country. For example, *Castañeda v. Pickard* requires every public school to engage in a three-pronged test to ensure that its programming for ELLs is working effectively. It must be based on sound research, properly resourced, and proven to work.

While the results of state assessments should raise our level of urgency about this growing population, educators need to look closely at what we are using to design, implement, and make data-based decisions about programming for ELLs, and to ensure that the programming works. One of the most common means for designing programming is looking at the four common descriptors of ELLs and building programming from this information.

**1. The languages of English learners.** Many state regulations call for schools to employ bilingual programming when there is a critical mass of speakers from the same language group. Schools with low numbers of ELLs or without a critical mass in any one language

group often choose an alternative model in which students are taught primarily in English. Bilingual programming is important to consider, and research points to its importance. However, according to Sonia Soltero's *Dual Language: Teaching and Learning in Two Languages*, there are hundreds of different iterations of bilingual programming. The same holds true for programs that are provided solely in English.

**2. Country of origin.** While many ELLs come from countries other than the United States, research indicates that the majority of elementary-aged ELLs are born in the U.S. Most ELLs are from communities that are distinct from that of the dominant culture of American English-speaking students, and these distinctions are critical to consider.

**3. Level of English language development (ELD).** In addition to the number of languages and countries of origin, ELLs range in English development from those at the beginning stages to those close to being proficient. Each state provides a means for measuring and describing the stage of ELD for each ELL. It is essential to know this information to guide instruction and assessments.

**4. Performance on high-stakes tests.** The achievement gap between ELLs and the general student population is significant and growing. In response, educators are analyzing the performance of ELLs on state tests to determine who needs to improve, what needs to improve, and how improvements will be accomplished. Most ELLs do not possess the English skills needed to fully comprehend and respond to state test questions, and are not as fluent as their American native Eng-

lish-speaking peers. So, we should ask ourselves if this is the right data to use to make informed decisions.

### Improving ELL Performance

An important and critical remedy for improving the performance of English learners and others is to look through an additional lens. That is, we need to understand the achievement gap as an academic language gap between ELLs who carry academic language versus those learning academic language while simultaneously learning English.

The federal definition of proficiency in English shines an important light on the abilities and opportunities that ELLs need to be proficient in English:

- The ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement on state assessments;
- The ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; and
- The opportunity to participate fully in society.

These abilities define academic language. Many, if not most, ELLs are academic language learners, as are many of the nation's vernacular speakers of English, in that they do not possess academic language. The skills that students need to be successful in school and to possess what many refer to as academic language are:

- Deep cultural knowledge;
- The ability to listen, speak, read, and write;
- Academic knowledge; and
- The ability to "think to learn."

To better understand the full meaning of this, let's look at two students,

Juan and Maria. They are both 5-year-old, beginning-level ELLs in Mrs. Spitz's kindergarten classroom. While Juan doesn't speak English, since birth, he has routinely observed his father reading the newspaper and his mother using the computer to find her favorite recipes. Both of his parents are college-educated and engage him in what author Lisa Delpit calls "middle class speech" and we, as educators, often call "school or academic language."

For example, before dinner, Juan's mother typically asks him in Spanish, "What do we do before we eat?" This veiled directive requires Juan to engage in three separate sequentially ordered events. He must stop doing what he is doing, wash his hands, and come to the dinner table prepared to eat. When Juan's parents take him to the local children's museum in his home country, his parents ask him thoughtful questions such as "Why do you believe Tyrannosaurus Rex has such big teeth?"

By the time he enters kindergarten in the United States, even though he does not speak English, he has had continuous exposure to a rich vocabulary; literacy as a cultural way of being and acting; activities that require organizational, problem solving, and decision-making skills; and what it means to be a learner. Thus, Juan's development matches the

ELLs are among the lowest performing group of students in the nation's schools in terms of graduation rates and high-stakes test performance.



According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, the total number of the nation's public school students flatlined between 2001 and 2010, while the population of ELLs grew significantly and continues to grow rapidly.

type of language that is used in school. While he needs to be taught English and academic subject matters by teachers who are culturally and linguistically sensitive to his English learning needs, his home language practices match what occurs in school.

On the other hand, Maria's home is filled with stories about her parent's childhood. When she is with other family members and their community, they also engage in storytelling because their culture strongly reflects these oral traditions. Her parents, like many in her community, did not complete high school. Their parenting style is explicit and direct. For example, Maria's mother helps her to wash her hands and brings her directly to the dinner table.

The behaviors in which Maria regularly engages include oral storytelling, rich with narratives of personhood and membership; activities requiring explicit following of directions; and using vernacular speech that is distinct from school language. If we look closely at many ELLs and native speakers of American English who are not doing well in school, we would find that they are similar to Maria.

To address the education of students like Maria, we must understand their learning needs. To do this, we must intentionally and routinely lead our schools to teach academic language learners the skills and abilities that students like Juan possess. An effective strategy for doing this is to

consider learning as a four-pronged process—akin to an electric outlet. In order for the outlet to be turned on, we must purposely:

1. Connect learning to socially relevant issues and build learning from students' personal, social, world, and cultural knowledge;
2. Connect learning to the level of literacy the students possess;
3. Synthesize what is key to learn academically by defining the overarching unit and day's learning objectives and writing these in student-friendly language. Explicitly tell students what they will do to learn (the activities that they will do to listen, speak, read, or write); and
4. Teach students how to think to learn. For example, if students are expected to describe, define, compare, or create, they must be intentionally taught the separate skills that are needed to perform each thinking skill.

When we use these four prongs to guide our leadership and vision about academic language learning, we have a much better chance of providing all students with equal access to an education and beyond. ■

*This article is adapted from Transforming Schools for English Learners: A Comprehensive Framework for School Leaders, Corwin Press, 2011.*

**Debbie Zacarian** is director of the Center for English Language Education and Advancing Student Achievement at the Collaborative for Educational Services in Northampton, Massachusetts.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BOY: SAMUEL BORGES PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK  
HISPANIC BOY: ANDY DEAN PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK