

NO MORE LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

DEAR READERS,

Much like the diet phenomenon *Eat This, Not That*, this series aims to replace some existing practices with approaches that are more effective—healthier, if you will—for our students. We hope to draw attention to practices that have little support in research or professional wisdom and offer alternatives that have greater support. Each text is collaboratively written by authors representing research and practice. Section 1 offers a practitioner's perspective on a practice in need of replacing and helps us understand the challenges, temptations, and misunderstandings that have led us to this ineffective approach. Section 2 provides a researcher's perspective on the lack of research to support the ineffective practice(s) and reviews research supporting better approaches. In Section 3, the author representing a practitioner's perspective gives detailed descriptions of how to implement these better practices. By the end of each book, you will understand both what not to do, and what to do, to improve student learning.

It takes courage to question one's own practice—to shift away from what you may have seen throughout your years in education and toward something new that you may have seen few if any colleagues use. We applaud you for demonstrating that courage and wish you the very best in your journey from this to that.

Best wishes,

— *Nell K. Duke and Ellin Oliver Keene, series editors*

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INTRODUCTION

ELLIN OLIVER KEENE

“Can English learners (ELs) really learn complex academic content when they are struggling to learn a new language?”

“Should English learners spend their days in the classroom with their age peers, or is it better for them to learn alongside other ELs most of the time?”

“How do I differentiate adequately for ELs in the regular classroom without impeding other students’ learning?”

“How long should it take an English learner to become proficient in English?”

In my work with teachers around the country, I believe I have encountered more questions about working with English learners than any other topic. Teachers ask these questions because they want to better serve children who are learning English. And the wide variety of heritage languages in some schools can feel overwhelming, leading many teachers to ask, “How can I possibly teach children who speak so many different languages—Farsi, Mandarin, Portuguese, Hmong—all together with my English-speaking children in a regular academic classroom?”

Reread the questions I pose above. You may sniff a subtle and very troubling strand of doubt that runs through each: are ELs *capable* of learning alongside their English-speaking peers? Perhaps we should pull them out of the regular classroom. Maybe they are holding the rest of our students back. Think of the deleterious impact those doubts will have on students over the course of their K–12 experience. Clearly, we

might need to rethink our expectations every bit as much as we might wish to improve our teaching practices.

After reading Julie and Jana's book, I'd like to add my own to the chorus of questions: Why don't we view children who speak more than one language as assets in our classrooms, as gifts to those who speak one language?

I have been honored to work with Julie Nora and Jana Echevarria on this timely and important book. The intersection of Julie's vast experience working with ELs and leading schools that serve them and Jana's twenty years as a researcher and her comprehensive knowledge of the research in this area will soon clear the fog around effective pedagogy for ELs. Together, they tackle the myths that have spread related to teaching ELs and provide numerous examples of teaching practices that capitalize on the richness of culture, language, and perspective our ELs bring to our schools. As Julie reminds us, "Some of the world's most celebrated artists and writers—Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Conrad, and Salvador Dali, to name only a few—know more than one language and have lived in a variety of cultures."

You're about to learn numerous tactics and approaches to use immediately with ELs (and, by the way, your other students), and you'll have new insights about diverse learners when you close this book. We know that you want your ELs to achieve, and we know you'll have the means to support them in meeting higher expectations. We—my coeditor Nell Duke and Margaret LaRaia, our indefatigable editor at Heinemann, and I—are delighted to bring this book to you and your colleagues, and we know that Julie and Jana have made an important and lasting contribution to the field. We are grateful.

NO MORE LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

SECTION 1

NOT THIS

No More Deficit-Oriented Instruction

JULIE NORA

Too often English learners (ELs)—the students in our schools who are in the process of learning English¹—are described by what they cannot do: they cannot speak English, they are not prepared for mainstream classrooms, they do not understand the culture of schools in the United States, their parents don't speak English and cannot help them with their schoolwork, they do not do as well academically, and so on. Even the official term *limited English proficient* consigns these students' academic identity to a negative label of diminished capacity. These feelings are only increased by standardized tests and teacher evaluation, and we become trapped in a cycle of limiting potential.

1. There are a variety of terms used to describe ELs such as English language learners and dual language learners. Here we use the term *English learners* (ELs).

Of course, there are real challenges in teaching ELs in a language they have not yet mastered. Teachers need to use a variety of strategies to scaffold instruction. Many teachers of ELs have good intentions but lack specific knowledge of the complexities of teaching grade-level contents and language. In this section, I will talk about how easily that knowledge gap can be filled with deficit-based teaching practices. I share stories of well-intentioned teachers whose teaching practices unintentionally communicate low expectations and deny ELs access to the education we want for them and that they deserve.

We Deny English Learners Access When We . . .

. . . Don't Gear Instruction Toward College Readiness

When I enrolled my niece in a suburban high school, I met with Mr. Mark, a guidance counselor. My niece had just come to the United States from a rural part of Venezuela and did not speak any English. Mr. Mark said he would only enroll her in nonacademic classes (physical education, art, music) so that she could learn to speak English. He explained, "I have a long history of working with these students. You've got to get them to talk before they do anything else." He did not explain how my niece would get the coursework necessary to apply to college in four years. In fact, he made it clear that he did not believe applying to college was in my niece's future.

. . . Don't Give Students Access to Mainstream Classes

Ms. Samuels' school recently saw an increase in ELs, which meant that for the first time, she was teaching students who had recently met the criteria to exit their EL program. Because these students still did not have the same level of language skills as their native English-speaking peers, she believed they did not belong in her mainstream

classroom. She set up a meeting with her administrator to request that the students be transferred back to an EL class—where they would not have access to content instruction—until they reached the same level of language proficiency as their native English-speaking peers.

. . . Mistake Language Development with Lack of Effort

With no prior experience speaking English, seventh grader Daniela arrived at Cunningham Middle School and impressed her teachers by using English within only a few months. Daniela’s teachers were pleased and surprised by her enthusiasm for speaking English, even when she was around speakers of her native language. Within a year, Daniela was comfortable socializing in English. But after three years, her teachers questioned her effort. Daniela still struggled with the academic English required for school. Her teachers were convinced this was happening because Daniela had stopped applying herself.

**For more on
how academic
language
develops**

see Section 2,
page 18

. . . Don’t Give Students Opportunities to Use Language While They Are Learning Language

Ms. Vostry knew that language learners go through a “silent period,” when they are learning to speak a new language. In an attempt to honor this reticence, she decided that her ELs would only have to listen to English in class and not be required to speak it. She intentionally limited ELs’ participation in academic talk: calling almost exclusively on native English speakers in whole-class settings and assigning ELs to the nonspeaking role (like note taker) in partner and small-group work. She expressed surprise that ELs did not grow beyond the silent phase in her class.

... Don't Incorporate Explicit Language Teaching with Content Instruction

Science teacher Ms. Angelo was concerned that Marquis, an EL, did not talk in class and had difficulty writing. When one of her colleagues asked

To find positive specific examples of each of these

see Section 3

how much scaffolding and explicit language instruction she had provided, Ms. Angelo responded, “I am a science teacher, not a language teacher. I have a lot of science content to cover and do not have the time to teach language.”

... Limit Our Teaching to Basic Skills

Ms. Jen had her seventh-grade ELs practice cursive by tracing letters and then words on worksheets. The handouts also included sentences, but none of the students completed this part of the worksheet. The teacher, when asked why, responded: “These students need to learn to write cursive before they can write a sentence.”

... Focus Solely on Vocabulary

Mr. Klein was so committed to expanding the vocabulary of his ELs that it became his near-exclusive focus. Every object in the classroom was labeled. Each week, students were assigned a new list of fifty words to look up and define, on which they were tested at the end of the week.

... Ignore the Progression of Language Development

Ms. Carey was concerned with the spelling errors of second grader Lucila. On two pages of math word problems, Ms. Carey circled each of Lucila's spelling errors and made her rewrite all of her responses. The word problems were solved correctly and the misspelled words were comprehensible (and developmentally appropriate for her age and stage of language development). Lucila's teacher wanted the best

for her—to spell correctly—but was misguided in focusing Lucila’s attention away from the math content. In fear of spelling errors, Lucila wrote shorter responses and thought less deeply about the math concepts. She began to dislike math.

. . . Ignore the Need to Learn About and Affirm Student Identity

At Marshall High School, the teachers and administrators do not share the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of most of their students, many of whom are recent immigrants. In the annual school survey (required by the state’s Department of Education), students and their families said they did not feel welcome or understood by the teachers and administrators. Faculty were surprised and frustrated by this feedback and responded with comments like, “How are we expected to understand the cultures of all of our students, they come from so many different places?” and “Our job is to teach them, not to get to know them.”

There are a variety of ways of getting to know our ELs that start with but include more than our individual relationship with a student. We also need to consider how our curriculum and school community recognizes the identities of our students.

. . . Don’t Communicate with Their Families

Mr. Michaels regularly communicates with the parents of his students. He wanted to reach out to Elizabeth’s parents because he was concerned with her academic performance. He did not because he assumed that they had limited abilities to communicate in English because they had recently moved to the United States and their daughter had not yet fully mastered English. He did not speak their language and did not want to make the parents feel uncomfortable, so he decided to forgo communication and hope for the best for Elizabeth’s academic improvement.

. . . Insist on English-Only Policies

A middle school teaching team decided to improve the English proficiency of their ELs by committing to an English-only policy in their classrooms. One teacher planned to post a sign with a construction symbol that says, “This is an English-only zone.” Another would keep a penalty jar and collect money when a language other than English was spoken or written. Another teacher assigned students the rotating role of “language police.”

. . . Overidentify English Learners for Special Education

Ms. Sanchez could not tell whether EL student Katy’s academic struggle was due to a disability or language. She thought it best to err on the side of caution and decided to refer Katy for a special education evaluation. Katy was given an individualized education program (IEP). Katy’s subsequent teachers struggled with knowing whether Katy’s difficulty was language or disability and Katy received excessive scaffolding minimizing learning. Four years later, when Katy became proficient in English, her IEP was terminated.

. . . Underidentify English Learners for Special Education

José, a seventh grader who had been in the English as a second language (ESL) program since kindergarten, approached me, his ESL teacher, to wonder whether he had a disability and asked how he might get special education services if he needed them. José was completely orally proficient using social language in English, but experienced significant difficulties grasping academic concepts.

Seeing English Learners Through a Deficit Lens

In each of these situations, the educators were trying to address perceived needs of their students. Unfortunately, these educators denied their students access to learning. Many had not received sufficient

professional preparation in how to teach students who are in the process of learning English or who have not yet mastered it. Their schools may not have been equipped with faculty members who spoke the languages of their students and may not have had interpreters or materials to facilitate communication. They were communicating low expectations, limiting access to higher-order thinking or academic content, and, in other cases, access to language learning.

Education Should Promise Opportunity

My niece's guidance counselor believed she was not capable of learning academic content because she did not speak English. He demonstrated a common and mistaken belief that EL students will learn English by being in classes with low-level academic expectations (art, music, physical education). In fact, students need structured opportunities to develop their language skills. Exposure is important, but so is explicit instruction. Oral skills do not absolutely precede literacy skills; they develop synergistically. When he denied her access to academic classes, he was denying the opportunity to develop the language and cognitive skills she needed. If I had agreed to his plan, she would not have received the course work she needed to apply to college. Before meeting her and without giving her the opportunity afforded by instruction, he had decided she was not college material. (Know that I interceded and my niece is now a bilingual teacher.) Too many EL students and their families learn—too late—in eleventh or twelfth grade that they had not been given access to the course work they needed to apply to college. Even more tragic is that many parents immigrate to the United States to ensure their child has the opportunity to attend college.

When Ms. Samuels wanted ELs removed from her class until they were proficient in English, she was confusing language proficiency with capacity to learn grade-level content. Regardless of language proficiency, ELs need access to grade-level content. In Sections 2 and 3, you'll see how teachers can do this in manageable, achievable ways. It

takes longer to develop academic language proficiency than to acquire social language. Access without support is not sufficient. ELs need daily, active opportunities to practice academic language skills in the context of learning content.

When Katy's teacher identified her struggle with language as a learning disability and when Jose's teachers overlooked his disability because he was acquiring language, the teachers did not understand developmental phases of acquiring a new language.

All learners, English speakers and ELs, benefit from explicit language instruction to engage in the higher-order thinking required to learn new content, but science teacher Ms. Angelo didn't yet understand this. When teachers like Mr. Klein focus on cursive or vocabulary in isolation, they decontextualize language learning, which increases the likelihood that ELs will disengage.

We may recognize ourselves in these examples. That may feel uncomfortable and make us want to disengage. That's how the teachers at Marshall High School felt when they learned how EL families felt about their school. That's how Mr. Michaels felt when he imagined having to deal with the discomfort of Elizabeth's parents. These kinds of conversations require a willingness to be vulnerable—to question whether our instruction is increasing our ELs' access to academic opportunity or diminishing it and to ask for help when we're not certain or overwhelmed. This book provides a framework of understandings and practices to make you a more capable teacher of ELs. Let's now move to Section 2 and explore the research on teaching ELs.