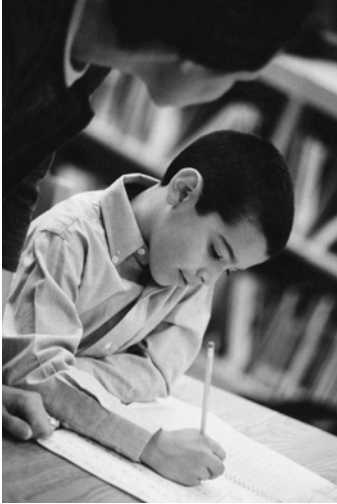# Using research to improve English learner achievement

Educating second-language learners and teaching them English is a major challenge for schools and districts throughout the United States. The English learner population is growing rapidly and is now the single largest student subgroup in the country. In 1990, there were two million English-language learners in U.S. schools. By 2005, there were five million, which is over 10 percent of the student population. The number of English learners has increased by 150 percent since 1990, while the overall school-age population has grown by just 20 percent.

In California, the challenge is even greater. English learners comprise 25 percent of all students. Students of Mexican and Central American descent are by far the largest English-language learner group in our state and these students are especially at risk. More than any other group, they tend to have family backgrounds characterized by poverty and limited education and they lag far behind their peers on virtually every measure of academic achievement.

Claude Goldenberg, Ph.D., executive director of the Center for Language Minority Education and Research (CLMER), has studied the **growing body of research on English learner achievement**. In a presentation at the annual Administrator's Conference on English-Language Learners held in Santa Rosa last April, he shared his insights on the research and the challenges we face

> **Teachers don't need a whole new pedagogical toolkit to teach English learners effectively.**

This publication is based on a presentation made at the 2007 ELL Administrator Conference hosted by the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE). As part of its Aiming High initiative, SCOE is providing this resource to teachers in Sonoma County.

in educating our diverse English learner population. He referenced two studies that provide a synthesis of English-language learner research and explained three key findings drawn from these reports.

This Aiming High Resource brief highlights the findings presented by Dr. Goldenberg and explores the impact this information has for classroom teachers and school leaders. Throughout the publication, examples of how one Sonoma County school district— Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified—has put these ideas into practice are featured.

Effective instruction for English-speaking students works for English learners, too

Today, we have a strong research-validated knowledge base of how to structure, present, and deliver effective instruction. "For too long, we've labored under the assumption that, if it hasn't been validated for English learners, it doesn't work for them," says Dr. Goldenberg. "But now there's enough convergence of research to indicate that teachers don't need a whole new pedagogical toolkit to teach English learners

Well-designed, engaging instruction serves all students

As the number of English learners in our schools increases, teachers must strengthen their core instructional programs with research-based practices. Providing opportunities for student engagement and participation is one such practice that benefits English learners as well as students who are fluent in English.

For example, in a second-grade classroom at John Reed School, teacher Jennifer Stalter designs a lesson based on a Houghton Mifflin language arts theme that actively engages students in paragraph writing. It begins with a classroom discussion of what it means to be "part of nature," during which vocabulary words are explicitly taught and ideas are connected to students' past experiences.

The class then prepares to embark on a nature walk. Stalter provides clear directions for the tasks students are expected to complete and she demonstrates how to do each one. She provides each student with a paper bag to hold items "collected in nature that are not man-made." They are also told they can write on the bags to note findings that won't fit inside.

Back in the classroom the next day, the students develop a common topic sentence, which Stalter writes on the overhead projector: *Yesterday, our class went on a nature walk.* Students record this on a graphic organizer (a Tree Map), then work in pairs to sort their nature walk findings into three groups: *What I saw, heard, and touched.* As a class,

Yesterday, our class went on a nature walk		
What I saw	**What I heard**	**What I touched**
butterfly	birds	leaves
leaves	wind	grass
big holes	leaves falling	flowers

This Tree Map shows how one student recorded her findings from the nature walk.

they share their discoveries aloud as Stalter records them. She then uses this information to model paragraph writing and show students how to write a supporting sentence for each column of their Tree Map.

Later, the class reviews the teacher's model paragraph, the writing procedure, and their idea maps, then they write their own paragraphs. They use highlighters to mark the elements of a paragraph in different colors—topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. As they do this, they are reading and rereading their work, discussing the content, and reinforcing their use of academic vocabulary.

All students are engaged in this activity, including those who have limited English skills. English learners are often paired with students who have more advanced language skills or who are fluent in English, or they receive extra support from the teacher or paraprofessional. ◆

effectively. What we know about children and learning still applies."

Education research has yielded greater agreement about what constitutes effective instruction than ever before. The research has also revealed that, like their English-speaking peers, English learners benefit from these effective instructional practices, including:

- Clear goals and objectives

- Well-designed instructional routines

- Active engagement and participation

- Informative feedback

- Opportunities to apply new learning

- Periodic review and practice

- Interaction with other students

- Frequent assessments, with re-teaching as needed

In short, Dr. Goldenberg recommends that teachers apply the same strategies when instructing English learners as they do with all other students. That said, he also noted 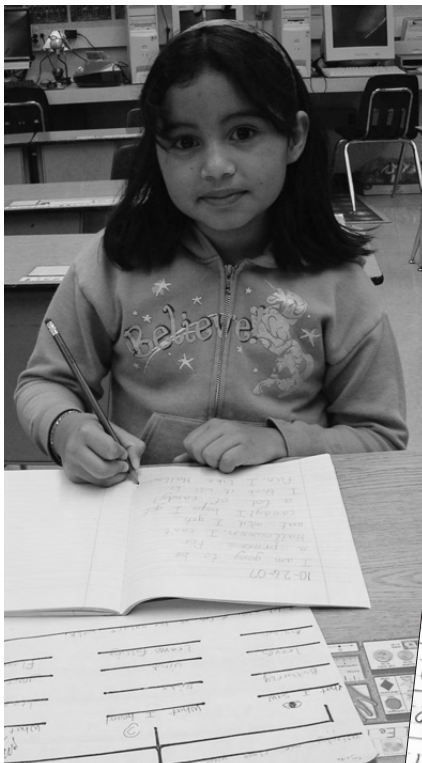that, "although obvious, we must be cognizant of the central fact that these students are simultaneously trying to learn challenging academic content and the language it's being taught in." Combining

Second-grader Iris Yajaira Gonzalez completes her nature walk paragraph using a Tree Map to detail the things she saw, heard, and touched.

good, structured, explicit teaching with the application of effective instructional practices is *absolutely essential* to helping English-language learners make academic progress.
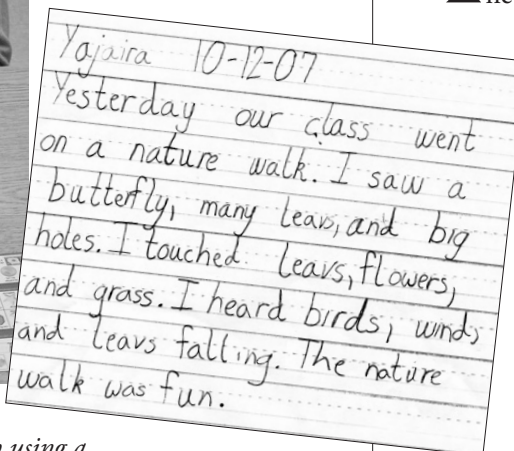
Language limitations require adjustments to instruction

While the same instructional practices are effective for both English-speaking and English-learning students, Dr. Goldenberg points out that teachers must make accommodations when they are instructing EL students in English. Research suggests that the academic achievement of English learners is heightened when they have enhanced opportunities to learn vocabulary, content, and academic English. Teachers can accommodate these needs by making adjustments to their instruction as described below:

- Provide predictable, clear, and consistent instructions, expectations, and routines

- Use redundant information such as gestures, visual cues, and graphic organizers

- Build on students' knowledge and skills in their native language

- Paraphrase students' remarks and encourage expansion

Research reports

The two research studies reviewed by Dr. Goldenberg at the conference are:

Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth
Available from www.routledge.com

Educating English Language Learners: A Synthesis of Research Evidence
Available from www.cambridge.org

■ Target both content and language development in every lesson

■ Target vocabulary and check comprehension frequently

■ Strategically use students' primary language

■ Use cognates from students' primary language

■ Provide students with extra practice and increased learning time

In outlining these ideas, Dr. Goldenberg noted that existing research does not yet tell us which specific instructional accommodations have the most impact—but, taken together, accommodations do

support improved learning for English learners. Given the formidable language challenges these students face, all teachers should be aware of how they can adjust their instruction so that their EL students experience greater academic success.

Learning to read in a primary language promotes achievement in English

Research suggests that having academic skills in one language helps students learn academic skills in another language. In the case of literacy learning, the research shows a modest positive effect when children

Designing accommodations

Teachers can design accommodations for English learners both by embedding support within lessons and by providing additional scaffolding using paraprofessionals, parent volunteers, or specially designed mini-lessons.

In one first-grade class, students are learning to blend and segment consonant-vowel-consonant words. Teacher Patty Ahlborn uses tactile body motions to actively engage second-language learners and connect them with the concepts being taught. She asks them to listen to a segmented consonant-vowel-consonant word, then repeat the sounds with her while tapping from shoulder to chest to opposite shoulder and, finally, to say it fluently. So /b…u…g/ is bug. Ahlborn also gives each student the opportunity to "be the teacher" by thinking of their own consonant-vowel-consonant word and segmenting it for the class. Classmates listen, repeat the segmented sounds and tap it out, then say the word blended together.

Accommodations for specific knowledge or skills can also be planned as ongoing interventions. For example, teachers can strategically design the EL paraprofessional's time in the classroom. John Reed School kindergarten teacher Susanna Pennes does this by analyzing the essential English-language arts standards in a lesson and reviewing the English

Language Development (ELD) standards for her grade level. "I look for overlap and also try to identify the ELD standards I know my students are missing," she says.

In one lesson, the standard being addressed is rhyming and several EL students are having difficulty with it, so this becomes the focus of the paraprofessional's breakout lesson. On another day, second-language students are not understanding what it means when something is above, below, or next to, so the planned activity involves instruction on the ELD standard related to directionality. ◆

Above: First-grader Axel Jimenez and teacher Patty Ahlborn use tactile body motions to blend and segment consonant-vowel-consonant words.

Right: Kindergarteners Cynthia Hernandez Negrete and Kimberly Castillejos Herrera work together to master the ELD standard of directionality.

are taught to read in their primary language first, boosting student achievement in the second language by about 12 to 15 percentile points. To place a value on the degree to which learning to read in one's primary language is beneficial, Dr. Goldenberg compared its effect to the similarly modest gain of teaching young learners phonics—"it can make a meaningful contribution, but is no panacea."

"Since over 90 percent of California second-language learners are in some form of English immersion," says Dr. Goldenberg, "knowing the impact of the *strategic use of the primary language* in these programs is key."

While providing instruction "overwhelmingly in English" in mainstream classes, teachers can use primary language in a variety of ways to increase learning among EL students. Selective use of primary language can be provided through translated textbooks and grade-level literature, academic support and cultural enrichment activities in after-school programs, encouraging at-home reading in primary languages, and welcoming students and their families to school in their home language. The use of a quick word or phrase in students' primary language during regular classroom instruction can often engage them in the lesson, open their minds to learning, and connect new instruction to previously learned knowledge.

Dr. Goldenberg reminded his listeners that the issues of language and culture are both political and ideological. "The challenge," he says, "is to keep these issues in perspective as we refer to research, seek effective instruc-tional strategies, and continue to evaluate and improve our programs."

He concluded his presentation by discussing the difficult road English learners must travel in learning both language and academics in our schools—and by recognizing the major task teachers face in providing effective instruction for the diverse students in their classrooms. "But let's not forget that, like previous generations of immigrants to America, these children, their families, and their communities have the potential to enrich our schools and the education system as a whole." ◆

> **All teachers should be aware of how they can adjust their instruction so that their EL students experience greater academic success.**

Using a quick word or phrase

Teacher Susanna Pennes applies SDAIE strategies throughout all of her instruction, but also uses primary language strategically in her kindergarten classroom, which serves a mix of English-speaking and English-learning students. To communicate the meaning of a word quickly and not disrupt the flow of a lesson, she'll sometimes translate a content-specific vocabulary word, like "pumpkin," into Spanish. When she observes beginning or early-intermediate English learners not following along or going off task, she'll connect through primary language to re-engage them. Seeing that a student has broken a playground rule, Pennes might explain the rule in the student's primary language rather than enforcing the consequences. In this way, the student isn't punished for not understanding the rule. ◆

Cotati-Rohnert Park elementary schools

Exploring new ways to focus on what each student needs

Over the past three years, Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District has established a "recipe for student success" that includes many of the strategies outlined in current research on effective English learner instruction. Three of the district's elementary schools—John Reed, Waldo Rohnert, and La Fiesta—have English learner subgroups that total over 40 percent of the student population, so they've specifically focused on the needs of this group. These schools have attained API subgroup scores of 729, 702, and 681 respectively, all above the county average. They attribute their success to a districtwide commitment to collaboration and a focus on what each student needs to be successful, as described below.

Teacher collaboration: Within the first three weeks of school, teachers in Cotati-Rohnert Park's elementary schools have gotten to know their students. At this juncture, they're ready to meet in grade-level teams to look at which students are above, at, or below proficiency and plan what they can do as a team to address student needs. They have state assessment data from the previous spring and initial local assessments for new students and those who are falling below proficiency.

The district's recipe for student success

Combine the following ingredients to achieve maximum student learning, teacher job satisfaction, and parent praise

- ■ District support through vision and resources
- ■ Expectation that all students can and will achieve and that all staff are responsible
- ■ Collaborative weekly grade-level time
- ■ Focus on data to guide instruction
- ■ Professional staff development
- ■ Safety net meetings three times per year
- ■ Focused interventions
- ■ Enrichment experiences
- ■ Parent involvement
- ■ Exceptional leadership

The plans each grade-level team make vary depending on the needs of the students and how the teachers decide to share responsibility. They may organize groupings across classrooms, request a specialist's time, or suggest that a paraprofessional be used for part of the math or language arts block. They might recommend that a student group be formed for focused skills, while another group be gathered to concentrate on academic language development. Individual student concerns are also discussed, alerting the team to potential higher-level interventions that may need to be considered in the weeks to come.

Grade-level meetings are held weekly so that teachers can continue to collaborate and monitor student progress. "This regular collaboration time has probably been the single most important factor in increasing student learning, as teachers share their expertise and work together to help all students," reports one principal.

Advancing language acquisition: Throughout the school year, teachers strive to build language acquisition into every content lesson, which is a staff development goal for this year. Specialists and paraprofessionals work with classroom teachers to support, not supplant, instruction that will help English learners acquire English. What does language scaffolding look like in these schools? Although there is not a set formula for scaffolding—it's always based on student need—here's one example.
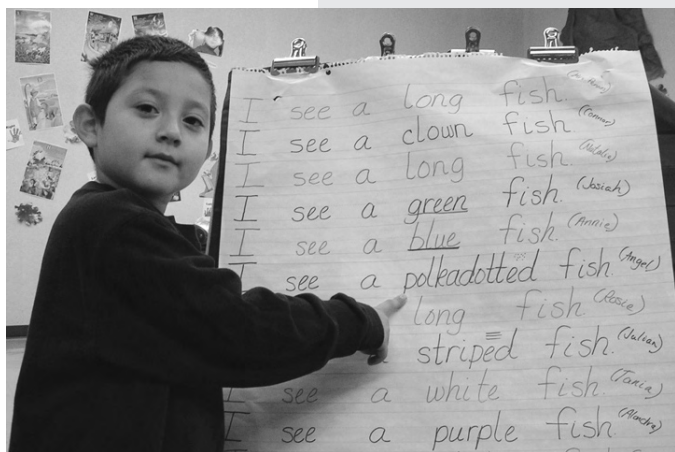
Grade 1-3 teachers at John Reed Elementary often group students by CELDT level and/or a combination of skill and knowledge levels. The teacher, specialist, and paraprofessional each work with a student group. The teacher rotates through the groups each day or period, while the specialist and paraprofessional support other groups with instructional activities the students are unable to do independently or that have more impact with adult monitoring.

Support resources from adopted texts, supplemental materials purchased with SB 1113 funding, and library/school resources are used. Specialists and paraprofessionals clarify and explain classroom instruction in the students' primary language when necessary. They also use graphic organizers like Thinking Maps, vocabulary teaching techniques learned from Kate Kinsella, and effective strategies recommended by Nancy Fetzer. Books-on-tape preceded by key vocabulary discussions using realia and picture walks are used to make language more accessible, while cognate

Kindergarten student Angel Ruano Ordaz completed the sentence and reads "I see a polka-dotted fish."

Focusing instruction on identified needs

Based on classroom observations and student assessments, the kindergarten staff at John Reed School noted that their students, especially the English learners, were not using a wide variety of describing words. To boost students' use of adjectives, the teachers designed this lesson. They begin by presenting a collection of fish pictures at a whole-class discussion. As they show the pictures, they ask students to notice how the fish are different and to describe what they see.

Following this discussion, the teachers write a sentence frame on a chart: *I see a _____ fish.* The students are shown more pictures and asked to use a describing word to complete the sentence frame. The sentences are recorded on a chart as they are shared. Each student draws a picture of a favorite fish and copies (or has an adult copy) the sentence describing their fish next to the drawings. English learners benefit from hearing the words multiple times, using the words in their own sentences, and gaining understanding of the purpose of descriptive words. ◆

associations, tapping prior knowledge, and page-by-page comprehension checks tell them whether the teaching is getting through or needs to be repeated. Student success is carefully monitored and groupings are adjusted as students make advances.

Supporting newcomers: Students who have been in U.S. schools less than a year or who are not accelerating in English acquisition may be placed in a newcomers group, where they participate in 90 minutes of intensive English Language Development (ELD). Here, the focus is on acquiring basic vocabulary to enhance language fluency; reading, writing, and comprehension skills; making picture/word associations; and some math facts.

In this program, a language master audio program allows students to hear and repeat words or phrases correctly. Picture dictionaries help students learn to write word labels, phrases or captions, and complete sentences. Basic sentence frames and flash cards are used for vocabulary, math facts, and learning short phrases. Computer-based programs such as Starfall, Rosetta Stone, and Let's Go are options for basic reading development and systematic ELD lessons. Students sometimes give simple book reports in their native language and, through daily writing activities, learn to write their "own" books in English, complete with illustrations.

Safety net meetings: All eight elementary schools in Cotati-Rohnert Park conduct a "safety net" process to identify and monitor English learners and other students

for focused interventions. This comprehensive process engages all classroom teachers in meeting three or more times a year with the principal and specialists to review and discuss student achievement.

Data from multiple assessments—state tests, district benchmarks, and classroom assessments—are reviewed and plans are made to support each student. The process may result in an individual intervention, recommendations for modified classroom instruction, or placement in a Title I or English learner program.

The use of data from multiple sources allows the safety net team to make specific, targeted skill or knowledge development recommendations and often triggers the design of new program models. As a result of the meetings, a categorically funded intervention group might be formed in a classroom, as a temporary small group outside the regular classroom, or in a before/after-school program. If these interventions are not enough, a student study team meeting will be conducted to determine next steps.

The benefits of the safety net meetings are tremendous, as all students are known by the school staff, actions are taken to support students who require more attention, and meetings to revisit student and program results are scheduled on a regular basis. The meetings also give principals a schoolwide picture of student needs that can be used to allocate personnel resources, develop schedules, and arrange for additional support. ◆

Middle school strategies

Mountain Shadows Middle School in Cotati-Rohnert Park has implemented changes to schedules and class offerings to better support struggling students, especially English learners. Ongoing staff development has focused on graphic organizers, academic vocabulary, and active student engagement—and teachers have incorporated these strategies across the curriculum to provide direct, focused, and engaging instruction. The school has also responded to recommendations from the Categorical Program Monitoring process and proactively sought guidance as a Program Improvement school.

To ensure that English learners are getting the instruction they need, teachers use assessment data from the CELDT, CSTs, district benchmark tests, unit assessments, monthly writing prompts, teacher recommendations, and parent input to group students and provide interventions. Students may be placed in English Language Development (ELD) classes, core English-Language Arts classes that apply Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies, or Title I math and reading interventions.

In ELD classes, students are engaged in the four components of a strong program—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They practice choral reading from a *High Point* literature selection and read with partners. The teacher provides visual, non-linguistic cues to teach new vocabulary and helps students use mirrors to watch the shape of their mouths as they pronounce English words. Students have many opportunities to listen to stories on CDs and to complete oral and written tasks. Writing is scaffolded with story maps and sentence frames designed to build grammar and language usage skills.

This year, both the language arts and math departments have begun scheduling time to collaborate and analyze data after each benchmark period. In these meetings, teachers look at individual, class, and grade-level data and discuss best practices for teaching essential standards. Based on the data, they plan opportunities to re-teach as needed and develop lessons for the next period.

The families of English learners are actively involved at this school. Many parents have been trained by the Parent Institute for Quality

Assessments	Class placements	Class size	Curriculum	
▲ CELDT levels 1-3	▲ Leveled ELD class ▲ Core language arts with EL paraprofessional	20 30-32	▲ High Point, Read Naturally, REWARDS ▲ McDougal Littell	**ELD Program — Title I Program**
▲ CELDT levels 4-5 and some R-FEPs	▲ Core language arts with SDAIE and smaller classes ▲ Reading class	20 10-15	▲ McDougal Littell ▲ Scholastic READ 180	
Mathematics ▲ CSTs ▲ Basic skills test ▲ Benchmarks 1-3 ▲ Unit assessments	▲ Core math at each grade ▲ Math intervention for each grade level ▲ After-school math labs twice weekly	30-32 20-25 20	▲ Scott Foresman (grade 6) ▲ Prentice Hall (grades 7-8)	
Eng-Language Arts ▲ CSTs ▲ Scholastic reading inventory test	▲ Reading intervention (five sections)	10-15	▲ Scholastic READ 180	
Note: Some EL students are also served in the Title I Programs				

Education (PIQE) to serve as advocates for their children. The English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC) is well-attended by parents who are committed to supporting the academic progress of their children. The ELAC has an executive board to help determine priorities, plan activities, and advise school administrators about EL student and parent needs. ◆