Chapter 18

Supporting Language and Literacy Development for English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers throughout the U.S. are faced with a variety of challenges due to the rapidly changing demographics in their classrooms. These teachers must recognize and address the vast cultural, ethnic and language differences represented while at the same time adhering to the different accountability based federal and state mandates. This chapter provides an overview of the policies regarding education of English Language Learners (ELLs), examines different ethnic groups represented within ELL subgroups including basic demographic information across the different states in the U.S. The chapter also examines challenges hindering school success and effective instructional support and strategies that facilitate language development and academic literacy.

INTRODUCTION

English language learners (ELL’s) represent the fastest growing sub-group of students in US classrooms with current projections that by the year 2025, one in four students in mainstream classrooms will be classified as an ELL (Ferlazzo, & Sypnieski, 2012). The ELL typically “speak a variety of native languages other than English, and possess varying degrees of English language proficiency and cultural dissonance. In addition, diversity by “race, ethnicity, home language, level of schooling, socio-economic status, parent’s level of education, parents proficiency in English, proficiency and literacy in their home language” have also been reported within the ELL subgroup (Wright, 2015, p. 2).

The No Child Left behind (NCLB) uses the term Limited English Proficient (LEP) to describe the ELL population served in K-12 schools and gives states flexibility in defining students who constitutes the LEP subgroup. Several states require parents enrolling their child in a school district for the first time to complete a home language survey (HLS). The HLS has been used by many schools as an initial
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A screening tool to determine students who may need follow-up assessments to determine their level of proficiency in English. It also provides data that will be used to determine placement or programming for the ELL. It is important to note that the “actual process of identifying ELL’s varies from state to state and in some cases may vary from one district to the next within the same state” (Wright, 2015, p. 3).

As the number of ELL students increase in schools across the United States, there is need for special attention to address problems associated with their low-performance compared to their non-ELL peers. Educators must explore effective ways to address their diverse educational needs with a focus on helping them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the classroom and beyond. Improving the academic outcomes for ELLs will serve as “a litmus test for whether teachers are meeting their charge to truly leave no child behind” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 1). This chapter examines the basic demographic information of ELL, policies influencing decisions pertaining to their education, challenges hindering their school success and effective instructional approaches for supporting students who are ELL.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Nationwide, the school enrollment numbers of ELL’s have increased by over 50 percent in the past decade. According to researchers (Ferlazzo, & Sypnieski, 2012; Wright, 2015), this subgroup represents a diversity of background and life experiences including:

- Students born in the US but raised in homes where English is not the dominant language; Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas;
- Students whose family are voluntary immigrants from stable countries who have had access to quality education but relocate to the US to explore better opportunities
- Refugee population with limited and disrupted education who have been resettled from war torn countries
- Migrant worker populations who are typically highly mobile, moving from place to place in search of better opportunities

Current predication is that if the numbers continue to rise at the present rate, the ratio of ELL to native (English-only students) speakers enrolled in K-12 public schools within the next 20 years could be one in four. In the following section, key demographic patterns of ELLs across the nation and the second language acquisition process will be addressed.

Demographic Information

Even though the US attracts English learners from many different language backgrounds, a large majority of the ELL population enrolled in K-12 schools speak Spanish. Research findings from a selection of studies (NCELA, 2015; Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015a; Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015b) examining the key demographic patterns of ELL across the United States (US) are summarized below:

- There are 381 different languages spoken in homes across the U.S. Approximately 50 of these languages appear in one or more states’ and the top five most common languages include Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Haitian/Haitian Creole.