Chapter 8
Meeting the Needs of Young English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT
From the fall of 2003 to the fall of 2013, the number of Hispanic students in K-12 schools increased from 19 percent to 25 percent; in addition, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. public schools was 9.4 percent during the 2014-2015 school year, ranging from 1.0 percent in West Virginia to 22.4 percent in California (NCES, 2016). General education teachers are increasingly likely to have ELL students in their classrooms, yet a majority of classroom teachers have little to no training in working with English language learners (NCES, 2011). This chapter provides a discussion of the role of language in learning, the needs of English language learners and their families, as well as the role of teacher preparation programs in preparing pre-service teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse young children.

INTRODUCTION
Changing demographics in the United States have yielded an increase in the English Language Learner (ELL) population; nationally, about 21% or about 11 million students in grades K-12 speak a language other than English at home and the majority of these students are Hispanic (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramini, 2010). The White population is decreasing, the African American population is remaining constant, and the Latino population is increasing (Martinez, Untereiner, Aragon, & Kellerman, 2014). Furthermore, an estimated 25% of children in the United States are from immigrant families and live in households where a language other than English is spoken (Mather, 2009). The fact that the nation’s teachers are and will increasingly encounter a diverse range of learners requires that every teacher has sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge and range of skills to be able to meet the unique needs of all students, including those who struggle with English. A general education teacher who knows the content and pedagogy to teach to the grade level standards will also need specific knowledge and skills to help ELLs access curriculum content. Ultimately every teacher is a language teacher.

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Preparing teachers to effectively meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students is critical, as these students are lagging behind their White counterparts in academic performance with achievement gaps in reading, writing, and math (Martinez, Tost, Wilfred, & Hilgert, 2014). Statistics show that the majority of classroom teachers have little to no training in working with ELLs (NCES, 2011). Yet, general education teachers are increasingly likely to have ELL students in their classrooms. To date, there has been relatively little attention paid to the essential standards, knowledge, and skills that general education teachers ought to possess in order to provide effective instruction to ELLs placed in their classroom (Lucas, 2011). Tellez & Waxman (2005) found that pre-service teacher education, recruitment and selection, in-service training, and teacher retention can contribute to improving teacher effectiveness in teaching children who are learning English as a second language. This chapter provides an overview of a) an overview of the linguistic and cultural diversity in U.S. schools; b) the role of language in learning; c) the needs of ELLs and their families; and d) the role of teacher preparation programs in preparing pre-service teachers. Because the majority of ELL's have Spanish as their home language, this chapter will primarily highlight this population of students, while acknowledging that over 450 languages are represented in schools across the United States (Kindler, 2002).

BACKGROUND

The educational term “linguistically and culturally diverse” is used by the U.S. Department of Education to define children enrolled in educational programs who are either non-English-proficient (NEP) or limited-English-proficient (LEP); K-12 educators generally use the same terminology to identify children from families where English is not the home language of communication (García 1991). A student’s home language is tied to culture including traditions, values, and attitudes (Chang 1993).

While there is an increase in culturally and linguistically diverse children in U.S. K-12 classrooms, the majority of K-12 teachers are White, middle-class woman who speak only English (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). A potential cultural mismatch between students and teachers means that it is especially important to ensure that teachers have opportunities to develop cultural competence in meeting the needs of ELL students and their families, as part of a teacher education experience.

Gay (2000, 2004) suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse children are being left behind academically because too much of what is taught in the American school system reflects White middle class norms that have no immediate value or relevance for culturally and linguistically diverse students, thus enhancing the achievement gap. There have always been and will continue to be questions on how best to improve outcomes for ELLs who face multiple systemic barriers that contribute to their low academic outcomes as compared to their non-ELL peers.

THE ROLE LANGUAGE PLAYS IN LEARNING

There are four domains of language pertinent to a discussion of the role of language in learning: listening and reading (receptive language) and speaking and writing (expressive language). Classroom teachers benefit from having knowledge regarding the process of second language acquisition and some ideas about how to link theory to instructional practices. “Many people may be able to speak more than one language but may not be able to function academically in more than one language” (Tare & Gelman, 2010).