

Meeting the Linguistic Needs of High-Potential English Language Learners

What Teachers Need to Know

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The population of English language learners (ELLs) in general education classrooms has been increasing over the last few decades. However, ELLs are still underrepresented in gifted programs and teachers struggle to provide these students with adequate educational experiences. What do teachers need to know about high-potential ELLs? What research-based strategies can be used with these students regardless of their language background? Teachers need to know the distinction between everyday and academic languages and about English language proficiency levels. There are strategies and tools that linguistically responsive teachers can use in educating high-potential ELLs.

Issues related to the education of high-potential ELLs have been discussed among researchers and policy makers for many years (Bernal, 1974; Marland, 1972). In 1972, the Marland Report highlighted that “highly gifted children can be identified in all groups within society” (p. 8). However, many of the issues concerning the education of high-potential ELLs remain unresolved, and finding effective ways to educate these students is an important task that researchers and practitioners in gifted

education have yet to fully address. Although much of the emphasis in consideration of high-potential ELLs has been on identification procedures to address underrepresentation (Lohman, Korb, & Lakin, 2008), Callahan (2005) urged educators of the gifted to consider ways to improve and guide the delivery of instruction of gifted students from underrepresented populations. Indeed, providing teachers with the tools they need to deliver quality educational experiences to ELLs once they have been placed in a gifted-and-talented program is paramount. A number of specific strategies have been identified in the literature as essential for teachers to use with ELLs (de Oliveira, 2011; de Oliveira & Shoffner, 2009). These strategies are used to differentiate instruction so that ELLs learn content and the English language simultaneously.

Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26)

Essential Knowledge for Teachers of High-Potential ELLs

The current federal definition of learners with gifts and talents states,

[Students who are gifted] give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB], 2002, p. 526)

Previous federal definitions (Marland, 1972; U.S. Department of Education, 1993) included reminders that giftedness is a phenomenon that can be found across all groups within society. Nowhere in these definitions is there a requirement for students with gifts and talents to have minimum levels of English proficiency. However, teachers who may have had very little preparation for working with ELLs may have to redefine or broaden their conceptions of giftedness in order to identify and educate high-potential ELLs. We argue that giftedness can be

found in all linguistic groups. Thus, adjusting identification procedures for students with gifts and talents who speak English as a second language is paramount and should continue to be a focus of research. Equally important, however, is to adjust the content and instruction provided in gifted-and-talented programs to meet the needs of high-potential ELLs, whether they have been identified as gifted or not.

Disproportionate Representation

Students who speak a language other than English at home compose approximately 21% of the population of children ages 5 to 17 years in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The greatest numbers of ELLs are found in southern states, such as California, Florida, and Texas, and in states with heavily populated urban areas, such as Illinois and New York (National Clearinghouse on English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2010). However, states such as Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont, to name a few examples, have experienced more than 200% growth in the numbers of ELLs in their schools from 1997 to 2008 (NCELA, 2010). These numbers indicate that the increase in the ELL population is a phenomenon that affects schools across the United States. Despite the increasing percentages of ELLs in schools, they remain underrepresented in gifted programs.

Yoon and Gentry (2009) examined the racial and ethnic representation in gifted programs and concluded that Hispanic students were underrepresented in 43 out of 50 states. Asian and Pacific Islander students were overrepresented in 41 out of 50 states, and White students were moderately overrepresented in 26 out of 50 states. Given that the ELL population in the United States will very likely continue to increase, according to recent immigration numbers (Batalova & McHugh, 2010), finding effective ways to educate high-ability ELLs remains an important task. With the number of such students increasing, there is an expectation of

an increase in this group's representation in gifted programs. Thus, although the focus of research has been on methods of identification that work with ELLs, teachers must also be equipped to work with ELLs regardless of their language background. Often ELLs are able to use the English language to communicate with others, but they may not be proficient in academic language usage.

Teachers can support ELLs by providing challenging materials that will support their content and English language development simultaneously.

Academic Language

The academic language of school differs from the everyday language used for communication (Schleppegrell, 2004). The everyday language students use to interact with peers and teachers in social situations was originally conceptualized as "basic interpersonal communication skills" (BICS; Cummins, 1979). The academic language necessary to grasp concepts in the different content areas was originally described as "cognitive academic language proficiency" (CALP; Cummins, 1979). Understanding these differences can allow educators to help ELLs navigate language difficulties they may face in schools. Cummins argued the distinction between BICS and CALP is that the majority of students acquire BICS more rapidly in order to communicate. The majority of this language acquisition occurs informally. Learning the academic language, however, becomes a challenge that most children and youth have to face in school; ELLs face this challenge while also learning a second language for communication purposes. Research has shown that proficiency in oral English takes between 3 and 5 years for ELLs, whereas proficiency in academic English can take 4 to 7 years (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Providing adequate educational experiences to ELLs includes teaching them the content necessary to perform well in

standardized assessments (i.e., CALP) as well as the language they need in everyday communication (i.e., BICS). Learning a second language can be a slow process (Hakuta et al., 2000), and ELLs may struggle with specific content areas if they have not acquired BICS. Therefore, many researchers defend bilingualism as a way to help students learn the content area and develop English as well their first language (Escamilla, Chavez, & Vigil, 2005; Hakuta et al., 2000). High-potential ELLs should receive instruction that allows them to learn English as they learn the same content as other students. Instruction should include advanced educational opportunities. Teachers can support ELLs by providing challenging materials that will support their content and English language development simultaneously. However, teachers should keep in mind a student's level of English proficiency in order to offer educational experiences at adequate levels of challenge.

Levels of Language Proficiency

Proficiency levels can provide valuable information to teachers on how to plan for instruction of ELLs. States are required to collect language proficiency data on all kindergarten-through-12th-grade (K-12) students classified as ELLs. The most commonly used instrument is ACCESS (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State; World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment [WIDA], 2014). ACCESS is a large-scale English language proficiency assessment given to K-12 students who have been identified as ELLs. It is given annually in WIDA Consortium member states to monitor students' progress in acquiring academic English. States are required to have academic standards for English language proficiency, and many states use the WIDA academic standards. However, states such as California and New York have developed their own academic standards for English language proficiency and may use different instruments to assess student language proficiency. A student's English proficiency level is most commonly

Table 1. TESOL Language Proficiency Levels

Level	Language performance expectations
Level 1 (starting)	Respond to some simple communication tasks
	Use language to communicate around basic needs
Level 2 (emerging)	Respond to more varied communication tasks
	Use high-frequency and common vocabulary words and expressions in oral or written short sentences but often with errors that impede communication
Level 3 (developing)	Adapt English language skills to meet immediate communication and learning needs
	Use more general and specialized vocabulary and syntax
	Able to communicate with others on familiar matters and to understand and be understood in many basic social situations
	May exhibit many errors of convention that impede communication but retain much of its meaning
Level 4 (expanding)	Able to use English in concrete and abstract situations as a means for learning in academic content areas, although may exhibit minor errors of conventions that do not impede communication
	Understand and use specialized academic vocabulary and expressions and construct sentences with varying linguistic complexity and lengths in oral and written communication
Level 5 (bridging)	Communicate effectively with various audiences and recognize implicit meanings
	Speak, understand, read, write, and comprehend in English without difficulty and use technical academic vocabulary and expressions
	Use sentences with varying linguistic complexity and lengths in extended oral and written communication
	Oral and written language is comparable to English-speaking peers

Note. TESOL = Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages. Adapted from “TESOL Pre-K–12 English language proficiency standards framework,” by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2006.

reported as a score, and like most proficiency tests, a certain level of performance is expected of students scoring at different proficiency levels. The Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) English Language Proficiency Standards Framework (TESOL, 2006) defines five language proficiency levels with information on students’ language performance (see Table 1).

High-potential ELLs at Level 1, 2, or 3 of English proficiency may require instructional modifications in order to participate in advanced programs. Students at Level 4 or 5 of English proficiency, however, have acquired a level of English proficiency that allows them to use English in academic settings. Thus, teachers may

find it easier to identify potential in these students. Information on the English language proficiency of all ELLs should be available to teachers in order for them to develop appropriate expectations for these students. Proficiency level descriptions provide general information on students’ abilities and skills; therefore, it is important for teachers to also get to know each of their individual ELL students’ abilities and skills.

Linguistically Responsive Teaching for High-Potential ELLs

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) *Pre-K–Grade 12*

Programming Standards (NAGC, 2010) include a culturally responsive curriculum as one of the ways educators can respond to the increasingly multicultural nature of schools and gifted programs. Villegas and Lucas (2002) defined basic principles of culturally responsive teaching, including respecting cultural diversity, learning about students’ backgrounds, understanding how students learn and promoting student learning, and being capable of advancing equity in schools. More recently, Lucas and Villegas (2011) expanded on the idea of culturally responsive teaching and introduced the term *linguistically responsive teaching*. Linguistically responsive teaching includes respect for and positive

attitudes toward linguistic diversity, ability to identify the language demands of classroom discourse and tasks, and application of key principles of second-language learning in the classroom. In Table 2, we provide an overview of the qualities, actions, and strategies employed by linguistically responsive teachers (LRTs).

Advocating for greater equity is especially important for ELLs, who can be overlooked for identification for gifted-and-talented programming (Harris, Plucker, Rapp, & Martinez, 2009). LRTs, in contrast, hold high expectations for content learning while providing support students need to understand and use the academic language, which is generally learned from teachers and textbooks. Difficulty with written language may be misinterpreted by some teachers who assume that fluency in spoken language indicates general fluency in the academic language ELLs are developing (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). LRTs, however, understand the need for direct teaching of academic language necessary for ELLs to perform at levels commensurate with their abilities.

These essential qualities of LRTs identified by Lucas and Villegas (2011) describe some orientations, knowledge, and skills that classroom teachers need to develop for teaching ELLs. The framework identifies specific qualities that *all* educators can develop in order to work with ELLs. Table 3 provides an overview of instructional strategies that teachers can employ when working specifically with high-potential ELLs, based on the essential qualities of LRTs and previous research on ELLs and their teachers (de Oliveira, 2011; de Oliveira & Pereira, 2008; de Oliveira & Shoffner, 2009; Pereira & Gentry, 2013).

Although at first glance some of the strategies in Table 3 may appear to be examples of how to simplify instruction to help ELLs learn the English language or understand directions and the materials, that is not the case. The goal of using these strategies is to differentiate instruction in ways that allow ELLs to learn the content and the English language simultaneously. For example, teachers can facilitate



learning by planning for appropriate language models. A teacher working with high-potential ELLs can make sure students learn basic and advanced vocabulary simultaneous to building a language-rich environment. The focus with high-potential students would be on developing advanced language proficiency.

High-potential ELLs often have the ability to learn a second language at a faster pace but need teachers who will challenge them and provide structured opportunities to develop academic language proficiency.

Providing opportunities for ELLs to interact with fluent English-proficient (FEP) students is also crucial. For example, Level 5 ELLs might be able to help other ELLs who are not as proficient in English by translating directions and content for Level 1 or Level 2 students. However, Level 5 students also need to interact with FEP students who are better models for learning the English language. Those interactions also provide opportunities for high-potential ELLs to be challenged, especially in classrooms in which teachers often need to use simplified

language because of students at lower levels of English proficiency.

LRTs plan lessons for ELLs that include language objectives. Those can include teaching how to use different types of discourse or learning vocabulary specific to certain content areas. A math teacher, for instance, can point out the different between a table (piece of furniture) and a table including numerical values. Teachers should plan to explicitly teach any language aspects that might present challenges to ELLs, such as the organization of the various sections of a textbook or of different types of discourse. High-potential ELLs can benefit greatly from using such strategies as they often have the ability to learn a second language at a faster pace but need teachers who will challenge them and provide structured opportunities to develop academic language proficiency.

Conclusion

The information presented should provide practitioners with essential knowledge for teachers of high-potential ELLs and key strategies that work with children of all language backgrounds. Many scholars in the field of gifted education have advocated for differentiating instruction to meet the needs of gifted learners,

Table 2. Qualities, Strategies, and Actions of Linguistically Responsive Teachers

Quality	Description	Strategies and actions
Sociolinguistic consciousness	Knowledge of how language use and language attitudes are influenced by sociocultural and sociopolitical factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and identity)	Use examples that are relevant to students' culture(s).
		Encourage students to discuss differences between their own culture and the "dominant" culture.
	Understanding of the connection between language, culture, and identity	Bring books and stories or folktales from students' cultures that have the same themes as those in their reading books.
		Share important historical events from students' countries of origin.
Understanding the ineffectiveness of learning English at the expense of leaving one's home language or dialect	Encourage parents and students to use their first language.	
	Ask students to share essential vocabulary in their first language. This might motivate English-speaking students to learn a foreign language.	
Value for linguistic diversity	Respect for and interest in diverse students' home languages	Ask ELLs to share essential vocabulary in their first language.
	Providing positive attitudes toward students' languages to encourage them to engage in school learning	Learn and use some vocabulary or key words and phrases in students' first languages.
Learning about ELLs' language backgrounds, experiences, and proficiencies	Differentiation of instruction according to the language proficiency levels of ELLs	Provide ELLs (especially those at Levels 4 and 5 of English proficiency) with opportunities to develop advanced language proficiency.
		Use instructional strategies presented in Table 3 to adapt instruction for ELLs.
Advocating for ELLs	Actively addressing the learning of ELLs and work to improve their educational experiences (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2011)	Go beyond your own classroom context to ensure ELLs receive equitable opportunities in school.
		Highlight the potential of ELLs when a deficit view is brought up in meetings or other circumstances.
	Awareness that ELLs can have gifts and talents.	Use information, such as definitions of giftedness highlighting that giftedness exists across all cultural groups, to advocate for the needs of ELLs.
Identifying the language demands of classroom discourse and tasks	Identifying the language demands beyond just vocabulary	Identify challenging linguistic forms and functions.
	Providing the background knowledge ELLs need to understand a lesson	Provide additional background during a social studies lesson to a student moving to the United States from another country.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Quality	Description	Strategies and actions
Applying key principles of second-language learning	Conversational language proficiency is fundamentally different from academic language proficiency.	ELLs may be able to use their everyday language to talk about the weather (e.g., “It’s nice and sunny today”) but may need additional support to discuss climate change (e.g., “Changes in weather pattern may lead to climate changes in a particular region of the globe”).
	ELLs need comprehensible input just beyond their current level of competence.	Do not need to simplify instruction; instead, modify it to meet the needs of your students.
		Keep in mind that high-potential ELLs may learn the English language at a faster pace.
	Social interaction for authentic communicative purposes fosters ELL learning.	Provide opportunities for ELLs to communicate with other students, who can serve as role models of language.
		Build interactive opportunities among all students (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005).
Skills and concepts learned in the first language transfer to the second language.	Differentiate instruction by teaching high-potential ELLs more nuanced ways to complete simple tasks. A student who can already tell time in his or her first language can learn new terms and ways of expressing time in English, rather than learning the concept of telling time for the first time.	
Scaffolding instruction to promote ELLs’ learning	Instructional support essential for ELLs’ learning of both academic content and English (or another language) in the school context (Walqui & van Lier, 2010)	Examples of scaffolding include activating prior knowledge, using multimodal materials and various written texts, employing different collaborative learning activities, using extralinguistic supports, supplementing and modifying written text and oral language, and providing clear and explicit instructions.

Note. ELL = English language learner.

and that differentiation should be used with all learners (Borland, 2008; Gentry, 2014; Peters, Matthews, McBee, & McCoach, 2014). Teachers should differentiate for ELLs and provide support for continued development of language. The best examples of strategies that work with ELLs are

those developed for use in English as a Second Language classes. Understanding language proficiency and the development of academic language can help teachers plan for instruction that is responsive to the needs of high-potential ELLs simultaneous to the provision of

advanced work. The same academic rigor should be expected of ELLs with gifts and talents as well as those English-speaking students with gifts and talents. Teachers who use strategies of linguistically responsive teaching are better prepared to help high-potential ELLs succeed in school.

Table 3. Strategies Used by Linguistically Responsive Teachers

Strategy	Examples
Build language-rich environments	Provide ELLs with opportunities to listen, read, speak, and write in English
	Provide ELLs with opportunities to develop advanced language proficiency
Pay attention to language	Speak clearly—enunciate
	Use steps in giving directions and repeat key points
	Paraphrase
	Pause often
Modify, don't simplify, instruction	Modify <i>how</i> you present information to students, not <i>what</i> you present
	Present challenging content
	Ask questions when you present information
	Model the expected performance
Provide opportunities for ELLs to communicate with other students	Plan activities where ELLs can interact with their fluent peers
	Provide role models of language (including bilingual fluent peers)
	Plan heterogeneous groups
Create opportunities for ELLs to understand and process the material	Plan for teacher-directed (in front of classroom) instruction
	Include individual, pair, and group activities
	Plan for reading from textbooks (either with the help from the teacher or as an individual activity)
Use multimodal strategies	Use oral and written language
	Use visual (e.g., pictures, flash cards, graphs, manipulatives) and auditory (e.g., video, music) materials
	Use direct experience (field trips, walks around school)
	Use nonverbal communication (body movements and expressions)
Identify the language demands in texts you assign	Identify what is challenging in the texts you assign—beyond vocabulary
	Identify the background knowledge ELLs need
	Discuss how textbooks are organized
Establish language and content objectives	Consider what you expect ELLs to learn about language and content
Scaffold ELLs' academic language and content learning	Involve ELLs in all classroom activities
	Provide temporary assistance so that ELLs are able to complete a task on their own
Make connections to students' language(s) and culture(s)	Use examples that are relevant to students' culture(s)
	Use students' home language(s) as resource in the classroom

Note. ELL = English language learner.

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