About this brief

This quarterly research brief will bring English learner research to practice through a practitioner lens. Specifically, this brief will focus on the issues that will make the greatest impact for California’s English learners; discuss timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts; and provide reflection questions and resources for teachers and administrators to use during grade- or department-level collaborative conversations.

Additionally, this brief aims to extend and expand the collaborative work accomplished among county offices of education through the STARlight (Students of Today Achieving Results) publication, which ran from 2004 to 2015. This debut issue of Focus on English Learners explores the importance of knowing the English learners in our classrooms, schools, and across our districts.

1. **FOCUS**
2. **IMPLICATIONS**
3. **QUESTIONS**
The Importance of Knowing Our English Learners’ Strengths and Needs

According to the new California ELA/ELD Framework, a central charge for our public school system is to nurture students to value evidence, comprehend and critique, use technology strategically, and understand other perspectives and cultures. This brief offers where we might begin to build on the strengths and address the specialized needs of our English learners, including our newcomers, long-term English learners, and English learners with diverse abilities.

Focus

More than 80 percent of California’s younger English learners (grades K-5) and, 55 percent of older English learners (grades 6-12) are U.S. born, and more than 40 percent of K-12 students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken, according to 2015 California Department of Education (CDE) data. Yet, disaggregated data reveal a disproportionate representation of English learners do not enroll in “a-g” courses, achieve proficiency in literacy and math to complete college-level work, or complete high school.

Frequently, when educators are presented with this unbalanced dataset, we ask, “Where do we begin the process of providing instruction that meets each student where he or she is, nurtures purposeful learning, ensures high levels of academic and communicative skills, and is respectful and responsive to students, their families, and their communities?”

In their 2012 bestseller, The One Thing, authors Keller and Papasan ask, “What is the one thing that I can do such by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” What one thing can we do to create more purposeful, coherent systems where our English learners – nearly a quarter of the K-12 students in California – can thrive academically?

We begin by getting to know our students. A growing body of research underscores the value of addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. Culturally responsive pedagogy—defined by Gay as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them”—promotes student connectedness with schools, decreases behavior problems, and advances learning. By appreciating and being sensitive to a child's background and educational experiences, we increase our individual and collective understanding of who our English learners are—including their previous schooling, home language, and literacy experiences—in order to identify and remove the greatest barriers to learning.

We need to study the data to better understand our students. We need to analyze the quantitative data, including our students’ language proficiency levels (both in students’ primary languages as well as in English), years in school, and CELDT (and soon-to-be ELPAC) scores. While these numbers are essential components for setting accurate language targets and monitoring student growth, truly knowing our students involves gathering individualized,
qualitative data, too. By gathering information about our students’ backgrounds and cultures, including identifying their home or heritage languages, we learn valuable information regarding students’ linguistic experiences, passions and interests, strengths as learners, and specific academic needs. It is also helpful to ask relevant questions (i.e., What language experiences have shaped you most?), observe, and listen. Classroom teachers can collect illuminating information about English learners’ strengths and needs through icebreaker activities, journals, presentations, home visits, and interviews.6

**Implications**

We need to build empathy for our English learners. With empathy – connecting, listening, building relationships – we can understand the diverse communities of English learners we serve.7 If our goal is to improve learning outcomes for English learners, increase students’ abilities to tackle challenging content, and create a culture that nurtures the capacities of broadly literate, college-and-career-ready students, then we need to better understand students who historically have been marginalized in schools and society.8 While there are many ways to build empathy for our English learners, one powerful way includes shadowing, a structured, intentional process of following a student for several hours or a full day to better understand the reality and range of his or her schooling experience. When teachers collaborate to identify English learners’ strengths and needs and plan lessons together – and administrators provide ongoing support and monitoring – stakeholders create a climate where a range of voices engage in meaningful conversations and exploration around meeting the varied needs of their English learners.
Questions

1. What is our current state? What systemic processes are already in place to gather quantitative and qualitative data about our English learners? What picture does the data paint?

2. How is the data collection process aligned with district protocols for ensuring student data privacy?

3. What is the ideal state? What data do we need to collect to meet the needs of different English learner groups, such as newcomers, long-term English learners, English learners with disabilities, and GATE English learners? What are some ways that staff might build empathy for English learners?

4. What kind of new quantitative and qualitative data might we collect? How will this data guide our work, inform school systems, and impact classroom instruction? How will we collaborate with staff to provide learning opportunities designed to meet the distinct needs of various groups of English learners?

SELECTED REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


Building Empathy, Larry Ferlazzo blog