

SUPPORTING SCHOOL SUCCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CONTEXT

Summary

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine propose to conduct two parallel studies focused on what is known about the development of young English language learners (ELs) and how best to support them across multiple educational settings from birth through the end of high school. Two separate expert committees, with overlapping membership, will conduct the studies. One study will consider children birth to age 8 and focus on the foundational elements of language development, developmental progress, school entry and practices for early school success. The second study will consider children and youth in grades k-12 and will focus on elucidating instructional practices and systems that can help ELs be successful academically. Both are focused on the needs of the current policy context, with a large EL population and ambitious new standards that will raise particular challenges for EL students. We are seeking funding for the first study of ELs birth to age 8, but include descriptions of both studies to put the birth to age 8 study in a larger context. The Birth to Age 8 Study will help to fulfill the Foundation for Child Development's efforts to build the knowledge base about how children living in low-income immigrant families learn and how policies and practices can be constructed to support their education.

Background and Context

The nation's ongoing demographic shift is highly visible in its children and youth from early childhood through the late adolescent years. Many children and youth live in homes in which a language in addition to, or other than English is spoken. There is tremendous diversity within the estimated 5.3 million young English language learners or learners of a second language (ELs) with respect to their multi-faceted socio-demographic characteristics and developmental trajectories. This well-established trend is projected to hold through 2020 and beyond.

This diverse body of children and youth learn in contexts such as child care, early childhood education programs, and the K-12 education system. For example, recent estimates indicate that of the nation's Head Start and Title I preschool enrollments, 30% (more than 300,000 students in 2006-2007) were ELs. In addition, more than 42% of the nation's English Learner enrollment was in Grades K-2 (approximately 1.9 million students in 2006-2007). Given the growing demographic and linguistic diversity of the student population today, current efforts to improve education and reform how children learn from the early years into the elementary and secondary grades can benefit from a critical analysis of the research and recommendations on how the research can be applied to learning settings.

There is a broad need for guidance related to effective EL programs at both the federal and state levels. This need is illustrated by the following policies, programs and activities: (1) The Castañeda standards in the Office for Civil Rights require programs to provide access to English Learning Development and adhere to rigorous academic content. (2) The Office of English Language Acquisition supports broad knowledge and practice dissemination, professional development, and field capacity development for ELs. (3) The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education oversees ESEA accountability for Title I and Title III programs and regulates actions required of systems undergoing program improvement. (4) The Federally Funded State Assessment consortia are working over the next few years towards establishing the federally required “common definition of English Learner.” (5) States granted ESEA flexibility are seeking guidance on how to understand the federal requirement under ESEA Flexibility guidelines that requires that states adopt English Language Proficiency standards that “correspond” to the new content standards. (6) Local education agencies (school districts), intermediaries (country or other regional offices of education), charter schools, and charter management organizations serve ELs and will need guidance on Common Core implementation. (7) The Council of Chief State School Officers has developed a framework for evaluating the correspondence between state English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards and the new content standards, and various individual state or state consortia efforts are rewriting their ELP standards to align to the Common Core (e.g, California, New York, WIDA consortium).

Two educational movements are particularly noteworthy and can be informed by the science on how children learn language, how educators can best serve ELs, and how policies and programs can be designed to ensure the successful educational outcomes of ELs. The first is a growing call for states and school districts to invest at the “front end” of education, notably in high-quality, comprehensive preK-3rd early learning systems with programs and services aimed at preventing depressed academic outcomes and ensuring successful results in later grades for all students. While the movement is posited for all students, there is a particular focus on at-risk students and ELs in particular.

The second movement is the widespread adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards. The new content standards call for major instructional shifts in the content areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science/Engineering for *all* students, but for ELs, educators need to pay particular attention to the key shifts associated with the role of language both within and across disciplines. This means that content instruction needs to become more attuned to their language demands, and also that English Language Development (ELD, synonymous with ESL, for English as a Second Language) instruction must change accordingly in how it provides participatory access and support for EL students to mainstream content instruction. These new standards signal a sea change for the design and delivery of English language development programs for ELs in K-12 public education throughout the nation.

A key question facing educators, policymakers, and researchers responding to these movements is how the research about ELs can inform instructional programs and high-quality instructional practices that enable ELs to achieve educational standards necessary to succeed in school and life. A growing body of research on how children learn a second language, timing of second language acquisition, and language teaching can be leveraged to improve our understanding of ELD, and in turn inform policies and practices.¹

¹ Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010; Cook et al. 2012; Thompson, 2012; Parrish et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2007; Horwitz et al., 2009